

ISRAEL STUDIES AT AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

IS THERE A PATH FORWARD?



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword by Prof. Yedidia Stern	5
Acknowledgements	7
Introduction	9
Part I: The History and Politics of Israel Studies as a Scholarly Discipline	12
The Pre-History of Israel Studies (1636-1985)	12
The Founding of the Association for Israel Studies (1985)	13
The Establishment of Chairs in Israel Studies (1992-)	17
The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise (2004-2012)	21
Brandeis University Summer Institute for Israel Studies (2004-)	24
The Israel Institute (2012-): Institutionalizing Israel Studies in Its Second Decade	25
Part II: Analysis – What Explains the Decline of Israel Studies?	27
Setting the Stage – Summarizing the State of the Field	28
Identity-Crisis: Israel Studies as an Interdisciplinary Discipline	29
Israel Studies as a One-Country Small Field: Shared Terrain or Foreign Territory?	32
Israel Studies, Middle East Studies, and Jewish Studies – From Unhappy Divorce to Shotgun Marriage?	34
Donor Dilemmas and the Academic Freedom Debates	37
Pedagogical Challenges of Israel Studies	41
Ethnic Studies and Israel Studies: A Collision in the Making	44
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) – For Everyone Except Jews and Israelis?	47
Despotic Dough: With Big Money Comes Big Impact	50
Cancel Culture and the American Campus Scene: Israel/Palestine as Canary in the Coalmine?	52

Part III: Recommendations – Can Israel Studies Be Saved?	54
Israel Studies: Time to Find Yourself!	55
The Role of Policy Institutes: Re-Orienting Israel Studies Beyond the University Campus.....	60
Conclusion	62

Foreword

In a time when higher education in the United States is undergoing profound transformations, the role various academic disciplines play in shaping public discourse has never been more critical – or more vulnerable. Nowhere is this dynamic more fraught than in the field of Israel Studies. This publication, *Israel Studies at American Universities: Is There a Path Forward?* represents a groundbreaking, and at times unsettling, investigation into the past, present, and uncertain future of Israel Studies within the American academic landscape.

Israel Studies, once a promising academic field born from a spirit of intellectual curiosity and cultural engagement, now finds itself beset on multiple fronts. Internally, the discipline grapples with a crisis of identity: what does it mean to teach and study Israel in a university environment where the mere mention of the country's name can spark controversy, protest, or censure? Externally, Israel Studies faces increasing marginalization within university bureaucracies, especially in departments and programs that have embraced the dominant paradigms of Ethnic Studies, postcolonial theory, and DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) frameworks. In such contexts, Zionism is often cast solely as a settler-colonial enterprise, while the complexities of Jewish identity and Israeli society are flattened or excluded entirely.

This report charts the historical evolution of Israel Studies. It traces how Israel Studies has attempted to maintain academic neutrality, only to find itself caught between external expectations and internal dissent. Most importantly, it raises the existential question of whether the field, as currently constituted, can survive on campuses where calls for academic boycotts, curriculum exclusions, and politicized hiring decisions have become increasingly normalized.

The study does not stop at critique; it offers an ambitious set of recommendations. These include a proposed redefinition of the field, greater methodological coherence, enhanced pedagogical support for instructors, and more robust partnerships with the lay public and policy institutions. Most striking is the suggestion that Israel Studies may need to expand beyond the traditional university structure entirely, reaching new audiences through think

tank collaborations and alternative learning environments that are more open to nuanced and rigorous engagement with Israel.

Indeed, one of the report's most sobering conclusions is that Israel Studies may soon be "administratively homeless," rejected by both Jewish Studies and Middle East Studies, and unwelcome within dominant academic frameworks. And yet, precisely because Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remain central to public debate – across politics, media, activism, and diplomacy – the insights of Israel Studies are more necessary than ever.

At JPPI – the Jewish People Policy Institute, we view this report as a vital intervention. It speaks not only to academics but also to policymakers, donors, educators, and Jewish communal leaders who care deeply about the future of Jewish learning, identity, and engagement. It is a call to preserve intellectual pluralism in universities. It is a plea to support young scholars who dare to explore the complexities of modern Israel. And it is a challenge to all of us to invest in a future where thoughtful, evidence-based discourse about Israel is possible, not just in the academy, but within society at large.

Finally, the survival of Israel Studies is not a parochial concern. It is a bellwether for the health of the liberal university, the resilience of academic life, and the integrity of scholarly inquiry itself. As you read this study, we invite you to reflect, engage, and act.

Many thanks to Dr. Sara Yael Hirschhorn, a JPPI fellow, for conducting this research with clarity, depth, and urgency – it is as much a diagnosis as a call to action.

Prof. Yedidia Stern, President
JPPI

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This report is dedicated to Dr. Haim Katsman (z"l), a promising young scholar of Israel Studies who was tragically murdered in his home on Kibbutz Holit on October 7, 2023.

Introduction

This study lays out the challenges facing Israel Studies on university campuses in the United States today. While the post-10/7 campus has brought new scrutiny to the state of the discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the quadrangle, the dilemmas facing both professors and students are not new. They reflect developments that date back to the creation of the research field in the 1980s and concurrent trends in the global university over the past several decades. Today, the academic endeavor of Israel Studies is at a crossroads and seems unsustainable in the contemporary campus climate.

Part I examines the history and politics of Israel Studies as a scholarly discipline to research and educate about modern Israel at American (and later, international) universities. It explores the “multiple parentage” of Israel Studies as an off-shoot of Jewish Studies, but also as an interdisciplinary field dominated by political scientists and historians who sought to create a professional community and later an actual academic discipline in the age of the peace process. Yet, while the epistemological, pedagogical, and ideological agnosticism of the field at its outset to attract interest in academic network was an important step toward creating a thriving Israel Studies community, it almost immediately introduced an incoherence of mission and approach. Soon, the Association for Israel Studies, the emergent professional body of the field, became embroiled in both a kind of scholarly exegesis of self-excoriation and political controversy. Chairs in Israel Studies, largely founded by donors during the Second Intifada to act as a kind of “corrective” to campus politics, brought tensions between pro-Israel philanthropy and professorial politics into stark relief, which have only been exacerbated by recent events. Moreover, it revealed that Israel Studies, which had developed as a research field, had put the cart before the horse in creating positions before it formulated a proper pedagogical foundation for an increasingly polarized and politicized classroom. The field also prioritized expansion through programming like the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise (AICE), the Brandeis Summer Institute

for Israel Studies, and the Israel Institute without creating a stable job market or ensuring the sustainability of Israel Studies over the long-term. Israel Studies has also been increasingly unable to cooperate with other cognate fields in Area Studies, including Middle East and Jewish Studies, over political issues. As Israel Studies now enters its fourth decade, it is in the midst of a serious identity crisis – unable or unwilling to answer basic questions about its aims, methodologies, ideological orientation, or future in a changing and often hostile academic environment.

Part II aims to contextualize the internal tensions within the field of Israel Studies against the backdrop of massive external pressures within and beyond the university that threaten the survival of the discipline. The intellectual and social hegemony of academic Ethnic Studies and administrative DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) policies, which has institutionalized a series of discourses that frame Israel and the Jews solely as ahistorical “white oppressors” within a broader frame of settler colonialism and state violence, has left no space for the discussion of the dual narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Further, by elevating identity politics and activism as the core goals, Israel Studies professed academic neutrality (even if that has come under attack from internal critics) is on a collision course with the agenda of Ethnic Studies. Put together with the organizational practices of DEI, which follow upon similar principles, Israel Studies is increasingly excluded from both the intellectual and administrative remit of the university. Students and faculty seemingly also do not have recourse to anti-discrimination policies and Israel Studies programs are increasingly the target of the Boycotts, Sanctions, and Divestment (BDS) campaign widely adopted in academia. Most concerning, these scholarly discourses and administrative decisions are now heavily backed by “despotic dough,” as illiberal regimes and state-sponsors of terror like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States have been funneling billions of dollars, without oversight, to American and Western universities for over two decades in exchange for an imprimatur of benevolent legitimacy. Put together, Israel/Palestine is only a canary-in-the-coalmine of a broader dysfunctional campus climate where “cancel culture” has become the norm and “From the River to the Sea” has literally mapped the contours of the free speech debates on the quadrangle. Israel Studies, at least in its current form, is fundamentally incompatible with these trends within the rest of university culture.

Part III attempts to answer the pressing question of “Can Israel Studies save itself?” It offers some interventions into the internal dynamics and identity-crisis of Israel Studies (and the Association of Israel Studies). It also includes a series of recommendations for how the discipline and its leadership bodies might clarify core principles, research priorities, pedagogical approaches, and political orientations, which may also chart a path to more constructive relationships with philanthropic support and the lay public. However, in the absence of top-down reform at the university level, Israel Studies as a unique field likely cannot survive current campus culture and may be cannibalized by the growing field of Palestine Studies. Therefore, this report stresses the reorientation of the field of Israel Studies beyond the university campus, including the possibility of creating a new Israel Studies curriculum marketed to multiple audiences, leveraging the unique expertise and experience of our fellows to offer world-class courses, trainings, and seminars to a variety of stakeholders around the Israel-Palestine conflict.

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing the discipline of Israel Studies that has never been undertaken before. By considering the future of the field both within and beyond the university, it aims to engage scholars, policy-makers, philanthropists, and others who may be interested in multiple outlets for the continued study of the history and politics of Modern Israel. Lastly, it aims to be a call to action that will also engage the Jewish lay public and the Israeli government in a moment of crisis to produce multi-faceted solutions to save academic Israel Studies from extinction.

Part I: The History and Politics of Israel Studies as a Scholarly Discipline

The Pre-History of Israel Studies (1636-1985)

It is important to understand the unique origins of American universities as deeply steeped in the Hebrew Bible and Israelite culture to situate both the possibilities and pitfalls of modern Israel Studies on campus since the 1980s.

The establishment of colonial universities in the United States modelled on the elite educational institutions of England was one of the earliest acts of the new immigrants to the New World. These young graduates saw their journey from England (“the land of Egypt” with King “Pharoah”) as a new exodus story, crossing the ocean to their “Promised Land” and took ancient Israelite civilization as a blueprint for the colonies, which they called a “new Caanan” and a “Christian Israel.”¹ Later, in the 19th century, when the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (The Scientific Study of Judaism) arrived in America,² bring leading luminaries from Europe, the appreciation of American higher education for the Old Testament and Israelite civilization deepened. This era also saw the founding of chairs of Semitic Studies (some 16 positions by the early 20th century³) and into the 20th century, these scholars expanded the field into the study of Jewish texts and traditions, religion, sociology and culture.

After the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel, the orientation of the discipline began to also address contemporary developments. Indeed, academic programs in Jewish Studies at major public and private universities emerged as part of the broader development of Ethnic Studies (including African American Studies), which primarily were initiated by young students of the 1960s seeking to connect to their roots through language and text. Yet while other Ethnic Studies programs evolved with an explicitly identity-inculcation agenda, Jewish Studies, perhaps self-conscious of its status in the post-war period, interpreted its mission as being strictly academic and firmly opposed to

any form of identity-based “Jewish education,” urging professors to “dissociate themselves from modelling Jewishness.”⁴ (Indeed, the first conference of what later became the Association for Jewish Studies at Brandeis University in 1969 was seemingly boycotted by 80% of existing Jewish Studies faculty who were opposed to new organizations and expansion in the field and looked askance at a lively debates about the role of activism in the academy, as the gathering treated such questions as who best characterized a Jewish Studies scholar (could one hire a rabbi instead of a professor?), whether communal input should be solicited in the creation of chairs, and what kind of curriculum should be taught.⁵) Ultimately, this point of view won out over other possible understandings of Jewish Studies (including pressure from the student base to teach students, essentially, about themselves) and the professionalized orientation of Jewish Studies mandated that academic concerns be its sole priority and that training a young generation to associate with Jewish heritage or Israel for identitarian reasons was not within its remit. While other Ethnic and Area Studies departments would engage in identity-formation and advocacy, Jewish and Israel Studies remained scrupulously neutral.

The Founding of the Association for Israel Studies (1985)

While the creation of academic chairs in the late 1990s was often seen as a counterbalance to hostile campus narratives, especially after the failure of the Oslo Peace Process, the origins of the original academic organization in Israel Studies preceded this intervention. It was much more of a scholarly social endeavor meant to begin to create a community of researchers with common interests in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as it became a topic of increased interest in American academia. In 1985, a group of professors led by Professor Myron Aronoff at Michigan State University formed the Association for Israel Studies as a means “to encourage and facilitate communication and cooperation between scholars and students engaged in the study of all aspects of Israeli society, and culture, and politics.”⁶ (Only in 2008 would the organization settle on a more solid definition of field as the study of the Zionist movement, the Yishuv (pre-state Jewish community in Palestine), and modern Israel after the founding of the State.⁷) The organization announced the creation of its newsletter (where this announcement appeared) and a first annual conference on the topic of “Israel: Prospects for Peace.”⁸ It also

advertised the AIS's intention to publish an annual yearbook with an annotated bibliography of publications related to Israel Studies, to sponsor future conferences, reports, and research grants, to organize panels at other academic gatherings (12 pioneering members had already put together a colloquium on "Who is an Israeli: Identity, Class, and Politics in Israeli Society" to be held at the forthcoming American Anthropological Association convention), to circulate the names of Israeli scholars on sabbatical in the United States to host at their institutions, and to generally promote matters of interest to its membership (for a nominal fee). Most of the initial AIS leadership were political scientists who focused on conflict resolution, terrorism, and international relations, as well as a few American Jewish historians. Many of these scholars held chairs at the original colonial institutions that had shown interest in ancient Israel and the Bible. Some scholars had also been trained by, or had taught at, Israeli institutions.

Overtime, the membership of the AIS expanded and a robust canon of scholarship in the new field of Israel Studies came into being. As editor of an anthology surveying new publications in Israel Studies, political scientist Ian Lustick explained in his introduction that the AIS was founded as "an organizational framework for the exchange of ideas on all aspects of Israeli society," and that the effort "to enhance the flow of knowledge and stimulate creative thinking through cross-fertilization that can occur in a multi-disciplinary setting" would serve to introduce the field to the U.S. and beyond. Lustick particularly noted "a perception that a substantial amount of Israeli scholarship, published in Hebrew, is not read or noticed by scholars living and working elsewhere," and that the AIS would bring this canon to a wider audience. Indeed, the volume itself demonstrated the interdisciplinarity and heterogeneity of the emerging field and its contributors, considering topics on Israeli foreign policy, religion and politics, Jewish and Arab literature, and the kibbutz movement. At its outset, Israel Studies embraced a wide variety of topics and temperaments, although this scholarly ecumenicalism narrowed over time.⁹

Only a decade later, the discipline had developed sufficiently to form a peer-reviewed academic journal published by a major university with a more concrete research agenda. The AIS had also formed partnerships with Israeli institutions and was increasingly influenced by the model of the Ben-Gurion Institute for

the Study of Zionism and Israel at Ben-Gurion University, with its historical and archival emphasis.¹⁰ (Some of its affiliated scholars would later occupy the first chairs in Israel Studies in the United States in the following decade.) There was also limited collaboration with the Israeli government, as some members of the AIS had received small grants to organize events or travel, although this practice later came under scrutiny by the organization.¹¹ As a principle, the field still stressed its capaciousness and proclaimed at the time that it “welcomes the multiplicity of views that animate the research, imagination, and commitment of scholars devoted to understanding and interpreting Israel.” Yet, it was clear that Israel Studies – as publications from the period reveal – had now taken a more critical turn, considering more contentious and polemical topics like “Zionist dialectics,” collective memory, nation-building, diasporism, and citizenship, even turning the lens of academia itself by investigating how new fields of post-Zionist inquiry like “critical sociology” were challenging conventional dogmas.¹²

The decade of the 1990s brought the historiographical revolution of the so-called “New Historians of Israel,” a loose group of scholars that challenged the national mythology of the 1948 war in the midst of the Oslo Peace Process, to American scholarly audiences. This was the first time that Israeli scholarship challenged the conventional history of the war, especially the curriculum which was taught in the Israeli school systems since the 1970s,¹³ which shook both the foundations of international academia as well as Israeli civil society in the midst of the volatile and violent moments of possible Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy. The immediate pretext for the production of new scholarship was the opening of Israeli archives to new files in Hebrew, English, and Arabic (many captured from the Combined Arab Armies) about the events of the 1948 war.¹⁴ This generation was also deeply influenced by trends of post-modernism and post-colonialism in the academy which pushed a group of scholars, mostly born around 1948, to reconsider their lives within a broader critical context. Last but not least, Israel’s first war of choice in Lebanon in 1982 and the outbreak of the First Intifada in 1987 also provided new national circumstances for the reconsideration of historical narratives.¹⁵

The first scholarly shot over the bow came from Simcha Flapan, a committed left-wing Zionist MAPAM politician and scholar, and the only one of the coterie who

was living in Israel during the 1948 war – his 1987 study challenged the “David vs. Goliath” story of the Israeli independence saga.¹⁶ Next were Avi Shlaim and Ilan Pappé (his student), who reconsidered the roles of Britain and Jordan in 1948, especially treating the role of UK-backed King Abdullah’s secret “collusion” with the Zionists to bring Israel into existence and expel Palestinians.¹⁷ (Both left Israel to make academic careers in the UK and have subsequently written more radical books that have departed from conventional historical standards and taken on activist roles for Palestinian liberation.) Lastly, and the only one of the original works also published in Hebrew, was Benny Morris’s *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (1988) which considered the causes (including ethnic cleansing, Arab propaganda, and Zionist paramilitary massacres) of the exodus of 700,000 to a million Palestinians during the 1948 war.¹⁸ The original cohort of New Historians was quickly joined by other so-called critical historians and sociologists whose work moved beyond the 1948 war to treat questions of Zionism and colonialism, Ashkenazi elitism and its effects on Holocaust survivors, the creation of an Israeli “ethnocracy” of second-class citizenship for Mizrahi Jews and Arabs, and the history of the Palestinian people.¹⁹ These new approaches also triggered a significant backlash within the Israeli academy, led by veteran historians like Anita Shapira, Ephraim Karsh, Tuvia Friling, Yoav Gelber, and others, who contested the New Historians’ findings on the grounds of major research and analysis flaws, but also questioned the goals of (what they considered to be) polemics meant to divide the Israeli public at a critical moment in history.²⁰ The debate over the New Historians also had far-reaching ramifications beyond Israeli academia and Israel Studies, with deep impact on revisionist historical scholarship worldwide.

The New Historians movement accelerated a definitive turn toward auto-critique – or and even self-abnegation – within the Association for Israel Studies, where post-Zionist scholarship became all but institutionalized. Papers and topics reprinted from the 18th annual conference in Israel Studies (“Israel in the Middle East,” in Vail, Colorado) in 2003 reflected a coming-of-age of the interrogatory tone, suggesting “scholarship about Israel is no stranger to controversy, criticism, and self-criticism.” Yet, editors wondered of this maturity or militancy – “whether this is a sign of a robust state of Israel Studies or an unhealthy penchant for self-excoriation,” particularly as the volume treated post-Zionism and the New Historians, the failure of the peace process, and multiculturalism

in Israel. Editors warned that the trend toward “the persistence of a post-Zionist perspective...reflects the domination of Israel Studies in the 1990s by a wave of scholars questioning the ideological and cultural foundations of Zionism,” and the field would likely see a “scholarly backlash.”²¹ Miriam Shenkar, who is the only scholar to complete a book-length project on the politicization of the field of Israel Studies – albeit one published in Israel with little fan-fare in 2012, before some of the worst manifestations of campus militancy took root – considered the self-conscious turn of the discipline unique (or even peculiar) in the larger schema of country and ethnic studies, as “this kind of existential criticism which totally condemns one partner in the debate is not common to other university based area studies programs.”²²

Increasing polarization and politicization of the discipline on the eve of the development of chairs in Israel Studies on university campuses would have profound consequences for the future of the field.

The Establishment of Chairs in Israel Studies (1992-)

Chairs in Israel Studies were established at an unresolved juncture in the development of Israel Studies to respond to the campus climate and donor initiative, more than the readiness of the discipline itself to move into a new stage of maturity. The scholarly direction of the field tended toward self-criticism and post-Zionism (which would eventually bloom into a kind of full-fledged doctrine) yet Israel Studies at the time still claimed to be objective and apolitical.

Whatever the flaws of the research program, at least this had been cultivated within the community of the AIS for almost a decade, whereas chairs would be responsible for teaching a curriculum in Israel Studies without any consideration given to developing a clear pedagogical approach to educating about a controversial subject over that time period. Lastly, as chairs were appointed haphazardly at receptive institutions where there was donor support and some department to house the appointment, there was little systematic thought as to where Israel Studies would fit within university administrative bureaucracy and politics of campus culture. The creation of these posts was not an organic evolution of the activities of the Association for Israel Studies or originated in the local demand of students or the professoriate at universities like the founding of Jewish Studies (and other Ethnic Studies) in the 1960s.

Rather, Israel Studies chairs were created as an intervention in the campus culture wars and as a counter-narrative to courses in Middle East Studies departments, mostly at the whims of Jewish-Zionist philanthropic support who were unversed in the particularities of academia but had identified universities as a site of anti-Zionist activism. It is no wonder that that without sufficient consideration of the epistemological and pedagogical problems inherent in the establishment of these new positions that chairs in Israel Studies continue to confront significant challenges in the contemporary moment.

The earliest chair in Israel Studies was established at Michigan State University (where the AIS was founded) in 1992. Two more chairs were established at American University and Emory University in 1998 by private endowment – both institutions also now boast Israel Studies Centers with associated outreach programming. These positions were followed by the Stoll Family Chair at Brandeis University (2001), which later inaugurated the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies, now the largest program in the world training doctoral students in the field. Brandeis’s hire for the position, Professor S. Ilan Troen, who retained his co-professorship at the Ben-Gurion University Center for the Study of Zionism and Israel, marked the closer integration of Israeli and American Israel Studies. Yet Troen’s hire was also a direct response to academic and global politics, as Brandeis University President Jehuda Reinharz himself noted, “for a long time there’s been an unspoken taboo in many U.S. universities against the teaching of Zionism and Israel...Centers for Middle East Studies...have an axe to grind...[and] it’s high time that we reverse this,”²³ even characterizing some classrooms as “academically irresponsible.”²⁴ Three years later, the Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation also sought to install Israel Studies at New York University in 2003 as a kind of counter-balance to the Middle East Studies program across town at Columbia University. While the donors didn’t fully inscribe a certain set of politics, they did hope that the donation would “fill a void” within Middle East Studies where scholarship was “cast in an Arabic point of view,”²⁵ and of the new chair, they maintained “it did not matter if the scholar supported the Labor or Likud government, it just could not be someone who said, ‘drive all the Jews into the sea.’”²⁶ (The NYU position then, was an appointment to distinguish between “what Israel is” and “what Israel does.”) NYU’s hire, Professor Ron Zweig, another alumnus of Ben-Gurion Center at Sde Boker is said to have come to the position with a somewhat different point-

of-view, on “the promise that he would never be forced to speak at a political event on Israel’s behalf.”²⁷ Later, Zweig told the New York Times that “we have a mantle of authority and it is scandalous for us to exploit this position in order to propagate our own views,”²⁸ adding in an interview to World Jewish Digest that “this job is not about advocacy, it’s about scholarship...I will not justify Israeli policy as part of my job; neither will I criticize it as part of my job.”²⁹ Elsewhere, Zweig opined that a generation on campus had been done a disservice by other approaches as “I suspect that the AIPAC sort of strong, unbending advocacy – intolerant advocacy – has alienated many uncommitted young Jews,” instead, he proposed, “my idea is: forget advocacy, let’s discuss the ideas. Let’s have the kind of discourse we have all the time in Israel.”³⁰ In the meantime, a concurrent search for a chair in Israel Studies at Columbia University itself reportedly failed due to the constitution of an academic committee of Palestine Studies scholars like Rashid Khalidi and Lila Abu-Lughod. Martin Kramer, a long-time critic of Columbia’s Middle East Studies program quipped to the press:

At Columbia...Israel can’t be narrated without the permission of the great Palestinian mandarins. They must be appeased, satisfied, propitiated. And we know what price they will exact. The incumbent of the new chair must be someone who freely acknowledges Israel’s sins, perhaps, even its original sin. It must be someone at home in the self-excoriating world of post-Zionism. It must be someone who will be willing to consider, in all seriousness, whether the ‘one state solution’ is the only one left.³¹

The position was filled by Professor Yinon Cohen – an Israeli critical sociologist who hailed from left-wing Tel Aviv University, who is also an open critic of the Israeli occupation and more recently a signatory of the Boycott, Sanctions, and Divestment (BDS) movement – only in 2008, with the inclusion of Khalidi and Abu-Lughod on the search committee.

There is little doubt that the campus politics on Israel/Palestine had a profound influence on the donations to establish a further set of chairs in Israel Studies at the University of California at the height of the Second Intifada in 2003-2004. Yet, the divergent paths of these two positions at Los Angeles and Berkeley were a cautionary tale for the further development of Israel Studies. While the funders of UCLA did claim “there is bias in Middle East Studies departments, no two ways about it,”³² their campus slowly built a program over the course of a

decade and rejected the policing of campus politics, explaining, “the answer to these sentiments is not shutting down Palestinian groups or anti-Israel speakers, that’s not what American universities are about. The answer lies in further education – to have a more systematic education in Israel, apart from the rhetoric.”³³ For them, the chair was a corrective to “a long-range problem. Knowledge is a cumulative process.”³⁴ The chair in Israel Studies at the University of California at Berkeley went in a distinctly different direction after Bay Area donor Helen Diller was “motivated by what she saw as an acrimonious and anti-Israel environment at her alma mater.”³⁵ (Diller told the press at the time that she was concerned about campus protests and the funding of Middle East Studies programs by “Saudi Arabian sultans,” adducing that “Israel is not well-represented academically, and I think this will help.”³⁶) Yet, the selection of the inaugural postholder by an academic committee caused a scandal on campus and in the community when outspoken post-Zionist critic Oren Yiftachel, well-known for his theories of Israeli ethnocracy, arrived in the Bay Area. As analyst Eric Fleisch suggested, the “mythology of the Berkeley looms large in Israel Studies circles,” as a cautionary tale for the future.³⁷

More recent appointments to chairs in Israel Studies have been quieter affairs, scholars who primarily identify with their discipline (the majority in political science) and use Israel as a case-study in their research. However, the drift toward post-Zionism and critical scholarship has continued unabated, especially as a second generation of younger academics has begun to replace the original postholders in the last several years. These include chairs at the following institutions:

- University of Wisconsin, Madison (2006)
- University of Maryland (2007, currently unfilled)
- University of Oklahoma (2007)
- San Francisco State University (2011)
- Portland State University (2012)
- Ohio State University (2014)
- University of Washington (2016)

- George Washington University (2017)
- University of Texas, Austin (2017)
- Northwestern University (remains unfilled)

There are also scholars who hold chairs in Hebrew Literature, Religious Studies, and other subjects with an Israel focus.

Funding for permanent chairs in Israel Studies has slowed dramatically since its peak in the early 2000s – a vicious cycle as anti-Zionist politics became institutionalized and donors abandoned the academy due to a loss of faith in return on their investments. Another troubling phenomenon is that the author can anecdotally count more than 10 positions/chairs in Israel Studies, that “on the books” remain fully-funded, that have gone unfilled in recent years, often for political reasons related to the Boycott, Sanctions, and Divestment (BDS) movement on campus. Younger scholars are trapped in a cycle of moving (both career-wise and geographically) from one untenured position to another, until many give up and leave the academy altogether, especially if they are aware that they have the “wrong” politics to be promoted. There is anxious attention to the need for Israel education in the wake of 10/7 and how Israel Studies chairs can meet this difficult challenge.

The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise (2004-2012)

As the creation of chairs slowed, a new organization calling itself the American-Israeli Cooperative enterprise was founded in 2004 by AIPAC-veteran Dr. Mitchell Bard, in partnership with the Schusterman Family Foundation, to continue the growth of Israel Studies. Rather than establishing endowed positions – a costly bureaucratic commitment – AICE funded visiting professorships, postdoctoral positions, graduate student fellowships,³⁸ and other kinds of event and programmatic funding with the intention to make smaller interventions on a larger number of campuses. Bard had long taken a special interest in the campus space, writing in a report entitled “Tenured or Tenuous” of “the problem of the faculty” and the need to “reclaim Israel scholarship.” To his mind, a more strategic deployment of expertise and funding was needed, emphasizing, “Israel’s detractors have a big head start, so there is no time to waste.”³⁹ Yet the report, co-authored with representatives of major campus

advocacy organizations, underscores what critics later charged as AICE's lack of clear lines between scholarship and activism.

At first, the impact of AICE was a major innovation, bringing Israel Studies to a wider audience – especially as a survey in 2006 showed that most universities still had no classes on Israel.⁴⁰ For the cost of about \$50,000/professor (with matching grants), over 100 mainly native-Israeli scholars came to 50 campuses teaching over 4,800 students at U.S. universities over a 5-year period. (At the height of the program in 2007-2008, 70 courses were offered to 1700 students at 27 universities.) Nearly half of AICE scholars were placed at large research universities, both public and private, including elite institutions like Harvard, Brown, and Stanford and large state schools like the University of Colorado, the University of North Texas, Rutgers-The State University of New Jersey, and Boston University. (A handful of placements were at small liberal arts schools like Middlebury College.) While the majority of these institutions did have sizable Jewish populations, many of the enrolled students in Israel Studies courses were non-Jews. Faculty were expected to teach “academically rigorous” courses without a “political litmus test” although their acceptance into the AICE program was conditioned on the principle that “Visiting Israeli Professors do need to accept the right of the State of Israel to exist as a Jewish state.” (Bard later asserted that “even if we had wanted professors to adopt an agenda, they wouldn’t have done it.”⁴¹) Professors were placed in receptive departments, with about half in Jewish Studies or Political Science units and the remainder in History, Middle East Studies, International Relations, Religious Studies, and other programs in the humanities and social sciences. The courses taught, while varying year to year, included a range of titles that reflected the interests and expertise of the professors that encompassed both conflict studies with titles such as “Israeli Foreign Policy,” “Debates in Israeli Historiography,” “Terrorism and Counterterrorism,” “Holy Sites and the Conflict,” and “The History of Palestinian Nationalism,” as well as a capacious list of topics about modern Israeli society such as “Arab-Palestinians in Israeli Society,” “Democracy and Human Rights in Israel,” “Messianism and the State of Israel,” “Media, Politics, and Society,” “Gender in Israel,” “The Israeli Welfare State in Comparative Perspective,” “Israeli Fiction in Translation,” and “Israeli History Through Film.” Apart from teaching duties, fellows were expected to organize and participate in public engagement activities (some that blurred

the line with advocacy) including lectures, film festivals, community meetings, and interfaith events and to court the media. Some professors came only for a year, while others returned for multiple stints, furthering the continuity of the programming and its funding.⁴² According to an evaluation by social scientists at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, the program was judged effective in expanding course offerings and mentorship, providing “balanced” and “neutral” content, and exposing American university students to Israeli scholars (and vice versa).⁴³

While AICE can claim many successes, it was a victim of its own success in that “the VIP program...has stimulated the desire, if not always the capability, of departments at host institutions to expanding the teaching of Israel through permanent chairs or visiting chairs of Israel Studies.”⁴⁴ Many universities were happy to have low-cost staff teach for a few years, but were unwilling or unable to commit to their own budget expenditures (and seemingly were also unable to find donors) to expand an AICE fellowship into a regular position. Similarly, AICE had created student demand for coursework with quantifiable metrics of learning and encouraged interest in pursuing further study and extra-curricular activities, yet this too could not be cultivated due to lack of funds. While the issue of Israel Studies expansion after an AICE fellow’s term seems to have mostly been financial, these temporary low-investment experiments in Israel Studies may have also revealed how fraught it might be to make the field a permanent feature of a particular campus’s landscape. At least in a few cases, departments and students had been openly unhappy with the placement due to both personality clashes and political battles.⁴⁵ There was also a frequently cited language gap in terms of a professor’s fluency in English and command of an American college student’s pop culture vocabulary, as well as a culture gap between the norms of the Israeli vs. American classroom. In the end, AICE could not create any kind of continuity (or a career-path for younger scholars), even as it has been reincarnated in new forms by other organizations.

Brandeis University Summer Institute for Israel Studies (2004-)

During the same period, the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis University launched its own Summer Institute for Israel Studies (SIIS) in 2004, taking a somewhat different tact than AICE by capitalizing on local talent and established resources at some universities to train professors to teach a course in Israel Studies and broaden the impact of the field, first in the United States, and later, globally. The range of prior knowledge about Israel of participants was mixed – some professors were already teaching in Jewish Studies or related fields (and had studied or taught in Israel) and came to the SIIS to deepen their knowledge and produce a syllabus to teach a new course. Others came with little background but a willingness to learn and teach.

Participants in the summer cohorts were invited to a 10-day retreat on the Brandeis campus in Massachusetts (with many costs defrayed by the American Jewish Committee and the university⁴⁶). They studied assigned texts, were provided with intensive lectures and moderated discussions on Israel Studies including foreign and domestic policy, history, religion and society, culture and criticism, and took part in syllabus-workshops and other programming in preparation for subsequent 10-day tour of Israel. Themes like the diversity of Zionism and modern Israel were stressed, although participants were also exposed to the political and ideological tensions of Israel Studies. Participants also received pedagogical training to teach about Israel in the classroom with emphasis on a “dual narrative” approach – a standard that gained universal adoption by Israel Studies by the end of the decade⁴⁷ – that exposed students to both Israeli and Palestinian points of view, which has become the norm of Israel Studies.

(At this juncture, it is worth pointing out that the dual narrative approach seems to be an innovation of Israel Studies alone. Palestine Studies does not include the Zionist narrative, nor do other conflict studies universally teach the narrative of the other. It perhaps goes without saying that most domestic histories also do not teach opposing viewpoints – for example, a white nationalist narrative juxtaposed with African-American history of the United States. How and why this became institutionalized within Israel Studies pedagogy requires its own critical inquiry.)

To date, over 300 scholars from the United States and abroad have participated in the Brandeis program.

The most recent survey of the SIIS program conducted in 2020 saw mixed return on investment, as only 51% of participants had taught a course on modern Israel in the past academic year (although some taught more than one), with 87 alumni teaching 128 courses to over 1800 students. (Cumulatively, audits of the program estimate that over 1,400 courses have been taught to some 33,000 students since 2004 – the vast majority (70%) undergraduate students.) Others did teach courses with a modicum of Israel content, mentored students, participated in events, and made media presentations. Professors complained that not all costs were covered by their Brandeis stipend, which required home university buy-in or was a barrier to their ability to take part in the programming altogether. They also were disappointed that they were offered limited resources to deepen their own knowledge after the summer seminar, or ways to make a broader impact. Yet, SIIS has broadly achieved its primary objective, as most professors who have participated have remained in the academy (and even at the same institution) and continue to teach about Israel in some fashion. The program continued with its 20th cohort in summer 2024.⁴⁸

The Israel Institute (2012-): Institutionalizing Israel Studies in Its Second Decade

In 2012, in a bureaucratic and personnel reshuffle, the Schusterman Family Foundation sponsored the creation of the Israel Institute as a successor to AICE. Chaired by former Tel Aviv University president and diplomat Itamar Rabinovitch and directed by Dr. Ariel Roth, the Israel Institute has continued many of the programs of its predecessor in nurturing Israel Studies on campus, while also forming partnerships with the think tank community for public programming and pioneering collaborations to bring Israeli artists-in-residence to universities.⁴⁹ To date, the Israel Institute has placed fellows at 176 institutions in the United States and overseas who have taught 1254 courses to nearly 30,000 students. Their data (collected by administered surveys to students taught by fellows) suggests a 40% improvement of knowledge and a 96% increase in pursuing further coursework or learning about Israel.⁵⁰ The Israel Institute has scaled back much of its early activities, including grants

for young scholars, female professional development, think tank placement, translation of Hebrew manuscripts, and other research funding seemingly due to a drop in its operational budget, but still remains the main player in the field promoting short-term professorships and programming in Israel Studies on campus.

Part II: Analysis – What Explains the Decline of Israel Studies?

The Growing Pains of Israel Studies: Epistemological and Pedagogical Problems

When social scientists at Brandeis University authored the last comprehensive study of the prospects for Israel Studies at American universities in 2013, they were quite bullish, writing:

In the past decade, a quasi-revolution has occurred in the teaching of Israel on college campuses in the United States. Israel – its history, culture, multiethnic society, and contemporary affairs – has been normalized in the curriculum and taught as the focus of course in hundreds of institutions...[including the]...most selective universities.⁵¹

Yet today it is difficult to share the optimism expressed here – especially as the authors conceded that growth of the field in terms of coursework and positions had slowed dramatically from its peak (2005-2009) by the time their own report was published. They pointed to Israel Studies as being “market driven” and that the decrease in financial support would precipitate a decline of the discipline on campus. Most importantly, these analysts found it difficult to quantify or qualify “the influence of serious academic discourse in the classroom on conversation about Israel in the public square,” leaving many open questions about the success of Israel Studies.⁵²

This report and others elide profound epistemological issues about the nature of Israel Studies as an academic field and in relationship to other disciplines and departments – all of which are responsible for the decline of field over the past decade. As will be discussed in this section, these problems include: 1)The profound identity crisis of “interdisciplinarity,” 2)The uneven playing field for Israel Studies among other one-country and Area Studies fields, 3) Israel Studies’ problematic relationship to both of its cognate fields of Middle

East Studies and Jewish Studies, 4) Tensions between donors and academic freedom around Israel-Palestine, 5) The unique pedagogical challenges of Israel Studies at universities today. Taken together, Israel Studies is in deep trouble as a discipline.

Setting the Stage – Summarizing the State of the Field

Unfortunately, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that the field of Israel Studies is on the brink of collapse within the university context. Despite the fact that the field is well-funded, has attracted the interest of both the scholarly and lay community, and could be a constructive intervention in campus debates at this moment of crisis, it is currently epistemologically and pedagogically incompatible with a campus climate since 10/7 that is increasingly anti-Zionist, pro-BDS, and even cheers Hamas.

As this section will outline, both endogenous and exogenous factors have led to the problems the field currently faces in the academic ecosystem. Israel Studies is suffering from a profound identity crisis – by privileging inclusivity over academic rigor and methodological coherence, it has lost sight of its self-definition and priorities. Israel Studies also created chairs in the field before it developed a pedagogical strategy to confront today's challenging classroom. Meanwhile, although Israel Studies does share some characteristics with other one-country and small fields in academia, including the decline of these units within a capitalistic university economy, it faces ideological and political pressures that put it in a more precarious position vis-à-vis university priorities and philanthropic interest. Israel Studies also suffers from a tense relationship with its two most cognate fields – Middle East Studies and Jewish Studies – and is on the path to becoming administratively homeless in academia. Further, despite the fact that Israel Studies continues to enjoy Jewish donor support and could conceivably leverage the events of 10/7 to fund new positions (which has waned in recent years), the widening gulf between the academy and Jewish lay publics, which culminated in several high-profile political scandals well before 2023, has made backers uneasy about their potential return-on-investment. Without a sincere effort at internal reform, it is unclear how Israel Studies can continue to mature as a field.

Yet as this section also underscores, Israel Studies is facing many external challenges to its ability to thrive – or even survive – in today’s academic climate. The prevalence of Ethnic Studies and its associated paradigms, the impact of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks that all but exclude Jews and Zionists, the influence of lavish Middle Eastern funding on university programs and politics, and the deterioration of campus culture in the age of “cancel culture” have profoundly constrained the ability of Israel Studies to flourish in the Western academy. The eruption of many university campuses, including both elite private institutions and state universities that have Israel Studies chairs, after 10/7 has only raised the stakes for the field going forward.

Despite the enormous (theoretical) potential of Israel Studies to contribute to campus dialogue at a pivotal moment, the realities of the scholarly, administrative, and social culture at many universities leave the field with few paths forward. Israel Studies, therefore, is at a perilous crossroads and it is unclear ~~w~~ it can survive in the contemporary academic climate.

1. Identity-Crisis: Israel Studies as an Interdisciplinary Discipline

From the inception of the Association for Israel Studies in 1985, the field has embraced a “big tent” philosophy in welcoming scholars from disparate disciplines, nationalities, and political orientations into the organization. Yet, today, the AIS and Israel Studies is in the midst of a profound identity crisis – adrift on accumulated legitimacy, it cannot answer simple questions about its aims, methodologies, and future in a changing and often hostile academic environment.

Basically, the only criteria for membership in the Association for Israel Studies or holding a university position in the field is one’s own self-definition as a scholar of Israel Studies. (This works both ways, in that the field seems to accept almost everyone who wants to affiliate and also assumes that those who do not want to associate themselves ipso facto have no relevant contributions to make – both of which are perhaps flawed understandings.) There has been no articulation of scholarly priorities or investment in the design of a systematic generational agenda for Israel Studies; rather, academics have approached various topics out of their own interests or career trajectories, all of which have been haphazardly cobbled together into what has been called a discipline, with

its attendant academic conferences, publications, employment, grants, and community that often lack coherence.

A good case in point is the conference program of the most recent AIS conference in Summer 2024 at Charles University in Prague. The catalog boasted an impressive number of participants and panels, but most sessions didn't address the theme of the conference ("Israel and Israel Studies: The European and International Perspective"), nor did there seem to be any hierarchy of priorities between, say national security of Israel or queer histories of mandate Palestine. As the chair of a divisional unit, I can attest that most papers sent in to this sub-field were evaluated through the subjective criteria of the reviewer rather than by a formal rubric (there were also unspoken guidelines that most projects should be approved unless there were glaring failures of scholastic merit) and these individual submissions were only later assorted into semi-coherent panels by other organizers. The awarding of prizes and grants at the conference were decided by closed-door committees based only on a vague set of published qualifications, leaving much of the process opaque.⁵³ The balance of Israeli scholars compared to other nationalities was also quite evident and may signal a decline in the field in the West. Furthermore, attendance seemed self-selecting – many notable figures who hold chairs in the field of Israel Studies were absent. While this could have been due to logistical reasons, there were also ample rumors that the political schisms in the organization have led to some prominent postholders of Israel Studies positions no longer wanting to affiliate with the AIS. The annual conference, of course, is only a window into the larger problems of the field, which otherwise has no central governing body or regular in-person meeting space during the academic year. The identity crisis of the discipline is therefore often hidden from view.

Even when Israel Studies scholars do talk to each other, there has been no effort to standardize vocabulary or methodology across multiple disciplines to allow academics from many different departments across the humanities and social sciences to truly have a functional rapport or identify and instigate interdisciplinary collaboration. This often leads to clashing conceptualizations (for example, descriptive vs. prescriptive, narrative-based vs. theory, neutrality vs. participant-observer) where researchers are talking past each other, with much being lost in translation of technical jargon. These problems were

exacerbated as chairs in the field were created, mostly as joint-appointments in a departmental home, each with its own attendant methodological bent, scholarly requirements, student priorities, and academic politics.

This begs the questions: What kind of academic training, language skills, publication record, course offerings, and mentorship abilities are required to be an Israel expert in a specific department or in the field as a whole? Are Israel Studies scholars to be committed historians, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, literature or film experts, or some kind of undefined hybrid? What percentage of one's scholarship or teaching must be focused on Israel to qualify someone as an Israel Studies expert? Likewise, how much of their research and teaching energies should be dedicated to Palestine (pre-State or contemporary)? As Miriam Shenkar has also intimated, what kind of intellectual, professional, personal, or even moral "compromises" have scholars had to make to answer these questions in a coherent manner?⁵⁴ (In a more positive view, Shenkar argues that these problems could lead to "paradigm shifts" and new "imagined communities" for scholars, but more likely only manifest in missed methodological and social connections⁵⁵ as individuals question their "academic identity."⁵⁶) , not least because the AIS (which may no longer represent the field as a whole) has not used its authority to even nominally define what standards are to be upheld.

Further, academia as a whole is highly balkanized with individual academics and universities making local decisions about what constitutes a field and its focus.

Nonetheless, this leaves Israel Studies in an untenable position where it cannot truly respond with one voice about its core goals, priorities, discourses, or methodology. With all of these fundamental issues left open to interpretation, it is no surprise that the tone is largely set by a small coterie of activists (often provocateurs) within the Israel Studies community who shout the loudest. Finally, with an over-abundance of trained candidates and a scarcity of new tenure-track positions available, the understanding of what constitute "correct" qualifications – and whether this is based on scholarly criteria or political commitments – is constantly shifting.

2. Israel Studies as a One-Country Small Field: Shared Terrain or Foreign Territory?

Israel Studies fits within a trend toward a resurgence in single-country studies since the 2000s, particularly in Comparative Politics and International Relations. This development is especially important as non-European countries like Israel are often under-represented in the literature due to the language barrier to research.⁵⁷ Some scholars have argued that Israel is in fact an ideal choice for the study of processes of nation-building,⁵⁸ democracy,⁵⁹ and even the very nature of comparative politics.⁶⁰ The field of Israel Studies has grown often thanks to scholars whose work may only consider Israel as a case-study.

Bureaucratically, the field of Israel Studies shares both similarities and differences from other one-country studies. Israel Studies grew out of early attempts to create community through the founding of a professional organization, with conferences and a journal. This is very similar to the development of French Historical Studies,⁶¹ Greek Studies,⁶² and Latin American Studies, although most of these were created several decades earlier and therefore had a head-start being recognized as a field. Some fields, like German Studies, also came into existence prior to a unification (or reunification) of its territory, or during periods of democratic transitions like Polish Studies, which may share features with the Israel-Palestine situation. Other one-country fields do treat nations that have perpetrated occupations of extra-territorial areas and peoples and have nationalist movements within them, including China Studies, Canada Studies, and American Studies.

Like other one-country or small fields, Israel Studies has many more affiliated faculty members than chaired professorships or permanent positions and have faced significant internal funding constraints to keep tenure-lines and positions permanent employment open decades after their founding.⁶³ (Israel Studies actually has far more tenure-track positions than most fields, the largest like Greek and Armenian Studies have about a dozen chairs and positions across the United States, whereas Spanish and Portuguese Studies have only two. Many chairs are unofficial, for example a European History department that might traditionally have a French or German scholar.) These fields have also embraced interdisciplinarity and comparativism to boost engagement with conferences, journals, and the field as a whole. Some have sought mergers

(Spanish and Portuguese Studies or Classical and Modern Greek Studies), which might herald the future of “Israel-Palestine Studies,” or the inclusion of one-country fields under regional auspices like Armenian Studies with Caucasian Studies,⁶⁴ Polish Studies within Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, or Japanese, Chinese, or Korean Studies under the banner of Asian Studies.

Like Israel Studies, many of these fields also foster communal engagement with Diaspora communities. This is especially true of those with “white ethnic” ties in the United States like Greek, Armenian, Polish, and German-Americans, who have a similar immigrant tradition as American Jews. These fields also run public programming, seek out local financial support of their programs from kinsmen, and offer study-abroad or tourism for the younger generation to experience the homeland. It is not unusual or verboten for these programs to also partially funded by national foundations that partner with American universities with sizeable donations for chaired positions. Where Israel Studies seems to deviate most significantly from other one-country studies is that it is alone among the many fields surveyed for not soliciting or receiving foreign government support for professorships or programs.⁶⁵

Yet Israel Studies is not alone in the tension between scholars living in the Diaspora or Homeland (including a turn to toward autocritique) or between academia and government.⁶⁶ Other one-country fields are certainly not without their political controversies either, although as a scholar of Greek Studies put it to the author, “on a lower-boil than Israel Studies.”⁶⁷ What seems exceptional, even among nations notorious for human rights violations, is that Israel is the only country subject to a sustained academic boycott. (Interestingly, the American Studies Association has twice held its annual conference in Puerto Rico – in 2012 and again in 2024 – even though it is a colony of the United States, which was billed as a learning experience rather than an justification for a boycott.⁶⁸) Even Middle East Studies, which is funded largely by autocratic regimes that regularly violate human rights norms, has not faced similar pressures.

While Israel Studies shares many similar dilemmas with small-country studies facing limited funds and declining enrollments, the ideological hostility facing Israel Studies makes it unique in the academy and prevents it from forging partnerships with other programs that could be in the interest of small fields in the future.

3. Israel Studies, Middle East Studies, and Jewish Studies – From Unhappy Divorce to Shotgun Marriage?

Israel Studies was originally considered a good administrative fit with area and ethnic studies, given its interdisciplinarity as a field and the aspirations on many campuses to develop an Israel Studies center like other Title VI National Resource Centers (but without U.S. government funding).⁶⁹ Given Israel's geographic locality, it seemed logical to make appointments within Middle East Studies programs and centers. Indeed, Israel Studies initially took some steps to facilitate this, these included:

- A research orientation largely directed at the Middle East rather than Diaspora Jewry, including the history of Jews in Arab lands, the role of Zionism and the State of Israel in their expulsion from the Middle East and North Africa, Israeli ethnocracy upon arrival as immigrants, and the dual identity of the “Arab (Mizrachi) Jews.” Indeed, Mizrahi history has often been seen as a kind of mediation between Palestinian and Israeli histories, with particular emphasis on restoring voices to the canon that were an alternative to Ashkenazi-centric Zionism. In some ways, Mizrahi Jewry has evolved as a “safe” topic of common ground between Israel and Middle East Studies, that while entirely neglecting the role of the Arab and Muslim world in ethnic cleansing, can find sympathy in collectively criticizing the State of Israel for perceived second-class citizenship of this group since 1948.

- Despite the fact that Israel is now 75 years old, the majority of scholarship in Israel Studies is still largely about pre-State Zionism during the Ottoman Empire and British Mandate in Palestine. Some of this scholarship focuses on imagined alternatives to the Israel of today as a kind of historical counterfactual, if one that distorts any contemporary research agenda. Moreover, it has precluded the development of Israel Studies as a field of contemporary study since the 1967 war, even as archival and other sources are becoming increasingly available for study. In the absence of good scholarship, this often leads to a void being filled by polemics about present day matters.

- Admirably, Israel Studies has also included a robust canon, including through Arabic sources, about Palestinian citizens of Israel and other Arabic speaking minorities since 1948, as well as the history and politics of Palestinians under Israeli occupation since 1967.

-As mentioned earlier, Israel Studies now boasts the near universal adoption of a dual narrative pedagogical approach that teaches both Zionist and Palestinian national understandings of the conflict.

-Most doctoral programs today mandate younger scholars to learn both Hebrew and Arabic.

However, the rise of the settler-colonial paradigm in the 1960s and the “Saidian turn” (named for Egyptian-Palestinian Professor Edward Said of Columbia University, whose scholarship and activism had a profound impact on the field – to be discussed further later in this report⁷⁰) in the 1970s that fundamentally saw Israel as a Western imperialist project incompatible with regional history and politics⁷¹ made Middle East Studies departments an uncomfortable fit or even an untenable option for scholars of modern Israel. Rather, Middle East Studies scholars who saw Israel as a European implant in the Middle East thought that it should be administratively re-housed elsewhere. As has already been noted here, donations to Israel Studies were even made as an explicit counterbalance to the perceived bias of Middle East Studies against Israel and the Zionist narrative.

Yet some analysts question whether early donors subscribed to a “questionable mythology” when it came to the bogeyman of Middle East Studies bias.⁷² Even critics within Middle East Studies, including a former Middle East Studies Association president, answered Martin Kramer’s arguments by asserting “nothing can be gained by writing off 2,800 academics (within the Middle East Studies Association) and labeling them an anti-Israel or antisemitic cabal. There are certainly those kind of elements...but there’s a large middle in MESA that is both reasonable and objective.”⁷³ Still, universities often capitalized on the perception, as much as reality, on their campus to encourage philanthropy in Israel Studies. However, in the last two decades (even long before 10/7) many of these claims could not be shrugged off as exaggerations of campus culture wars. A series of high-profile incidents at Columbia and Barnard universities in the early 2000s involving professors accused of anti-Israel bias culminated in the film documenting student intimidation (“Columbia Unbecoming,”⁷⁴) that fueled fears about the field as a whole. Another major source of tension has been the activities of the Middle East Studies Association, a professional body of scholars of the region (their website lists “Palestine/Israel” among

its country-specific designations). While the tenor of the organization has historically been anti-Zionist and it has been issuing pro-Palestinian press advocacy statements since the mid-1990s,⁷⁵ the failure of the peace process and the cycle of Israel-Hamas wars since 2006 seems to have precipitated MESA's preoccupation with Israel-Palestine. (While MESA does advocate on a wide range of scholarly and human rights issues across the Middle East, its concentration on the Palestine question and on criticism of Israel is notable and far beyond the norm.) Increasingly, presentations by scholars about Israel/Palestine were circumscribed by political dictates and some Israeli citizens and Diaspora Zionists felt so uncomfortable attending that they started their own professional organization, the Association for the Study of the Middle East and North Africa (ASMEA) as an alternative. Only more recently, in 2022, did the Middle East Studies Association membership vote to officially join the academic boycott of Israel, although individual departments, programs, and scholars at member universities had long embraced this stance. Since October 7th, it has issued several public statements about the "genocide" and "scholasticide" perpetrated by Israel in Gaza.⁷⁶ Certainly, after 10/7, it seems nearly impossible to imagine a future where Israel Studies would be integrated into a Middle East Studies curriculum.

As an administrative alternative to Middle East Studies, appointments in Israel Studies were shifted to Jewish Studies, yet this arrangement could often be described as a shotgun marriage. If Jewish Studies was once a kind of "older brother" to the newly emerging field of Israel Studies,⁷⁷ it soon devolved into a sibling rivalry between Zionism and Diasporic Jewish history. As the discipline professionalized and has become increasingly dominated by non- and anti-Zionist scholars within its professional organizations and senior ranks, the tensions between Jewish and Israel Studies have been drawn into stark relief.⁷⁸ Jewish Studies as a field has generally adapted to post-colonial and deconstructionist trends across the academy that have influenced its reading of Jewish history. The professional orientation is now largely toward a critique of Jewish power and Jewish sovereignty. Jewish Studies generally asserts, correctly, that Jewish self-determination was largely an aberration in the grand scheme of Jewish history and politics. Yet it has taken this an ideological step further in the rejection of Israel (and Israel Studies) as the apotheosis of a larger narrative, with a distinct preference toward Diasporism and – in essence, Jewish powerlessness as the subject of foreign rule. Israel

as a central principle of Jewish faith, peoplehood, and nationhood is to be “problematized” and scholars pointed to what they considered a conflation of “Israeliness” and “Jewishness.”⁷⁹ At a 2018 academic colloquium, Jewish Studies scholars even wondered out loud what was really Jewish about Jewish self-determination, opining that “references to Polish nationalism may be more useful for understanding Zionism than quotes from Judaic sources.”⁸⁰ One younger scholar even argued for what he called “Methodological Canaanism,” within Middle East Studies as an alternative to Jewish Studies.⁸¹

Some of the concerns within Jewish Studies also came from a more pragmatic place: that contemporary topics like Israel Studies (and to a lesser extent, Holocaust Studies) were drawing away all their donors and students and crowding-out less “popular” subjects, which skewed the department priorities both academically and bureaucratically over the long term. They resented philanthropic support for Israel Studies at the expense of other research areas – and a pro-Israel and pro-Zionist approach to Jewish history and politics that came with it. They also worried that Israel Studies would jeopardize the discipline’s position on neutrality, given the State of Israel’s own perception of its peculiar status between “chosenness” by divine selection of the Jewish people and normalization as a nation bound by the same doctrine and laws as all others within the international community.⁸² Furthermore, the increasingly anti-Zionist viewpoints of many younger faculty (which has even led to informal calls witnessed by the author to remove the Israel Studies division from the Association for Jewish Studies and attempts to convince the membership to pass a BDS resolution!) are evidence of significant generational change that may lead to a future divorce of the disciplines.⁸³ One professor called Israel Studies a field that was “twice-orphaned” at birth.⁸⁴

4. Donor Dilemmas and the Academic Freedom Debates

The creation of Israel Studies chairs almost exclusively through donor funding has had a distinct legacy for “buy-in” from academic stakeholders in these positions and programs.⁸⁵ There is nothing necessarily unique about external funding – Jewish Studies is largely sponsored through philanthropy and Middle East Studies departments and programs are heavily funded by outside donations including from Qatar and other illiberal state-sponsors of terror that are some of the most generous funders of American universities today.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, Israel Studies was treated differently for a perception, if not necessarily a

reality, that it was financed as a corrective to other academic approaches, or even to conduct advocacy on campus. As one Visiting Professor in Israel Studies expressed with some cynicism to analyst Eric Fleisch, “I understand there are Saudi-sponsored chairs urging opinions positively predisposed to Saudi Arabia and the Arab world, so why not this too...this is a free market. It’s okay to try to do this. Institutions can turn them down. Lots of institutions will accept them.”⁸⁷ Even the esteemed Zionist intellectual and Rabbi Arthur Herzberg considered this fair play, averring in 2006 that “The Arab chairs are as entitled to have their say as we are...Professor Rashid Khalidi has every right to be a Palestinian nationalist, provided he gets his footnotes right. I was at Columbia for 30 years, and no one ever questioned my Zionist connections. They only questioned whether I got my footnotes right.”⁸⁸ (It’s hard to imagine this being the case today, however.) Some scholars openly admitted that they felt hamstrung by a kind of double standard between other Ethnic Studies and Israel Studies but remained committed to academic neutrality. There remains a deep reluctance to turn Israel Studies into a “counter-war”⁸⁹ – if anything, the battle has been within the field in its own “self-excoriation.”

The tensions around what could and could not be said within Israel Studies became publicly evident with the 2019 edition of the AIS-affiliated journal Israel Studies entitled “Word Crimes: Reclaiming the Language of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” which sought to interrogate the valence of commonly used terms like “indigeneity,” “colonialism,” “apartheid,” by scholars around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As its editor, Professor Donna Robinson Divine of Smith College, questioned in the introduction to the special issue, “Do words matter?” The anthology meant to explore the “linguistic alchemy” of how Zionism and Israel had “not simple been rebranded; it has essentially been renamed” and to “describe how and why it acquired totemic status in the academy.” To Divine, these debates were not only about “academic constructs” by “faculty gatekeepers” but inculcating the broader public with a new kind of scholarly terminology that Israel was responsible for true “evil” – words that inspired acts of violence against Israelis and Jews in the real world.⁹⁰ Divine positioned this set of a articles as “revisionist scholarship” that would ultimately lead toward both greater “academic integrity” and co-existence in Israel/Palestine.

Yet once the volume was published, the reaction from academia was swift – Haaretz characterized it as an “internal war” within the field. Some 200 scholars signed a protest letter claiming that the issue lacked scholarly integrity and proper peer review (indeed it contained several articles that appeared without strong research or footnotes⁹¹ and some editorial board members claim not to have seen drafts before publication), had a pronounced pro-Israel bias, and that many of its contributors were associated with a right-leaning activist organization called Scholars for Peace in the Middle East.⁹² George Washington University Israel Studies Chair Arie Dubnov likened the edition to Orwellian “Newspeak.” Post-Zionist sociologist Gershon Shafir went so far as to suggest that the publication of the anthology was an act of violence itself, meant to “suppress critical voices and dissenting views,” and railed that the AIS was now supporting “the repoliticization of the study of Israel through the criminalization of scholarship.” Ian Lustick, an AIS original founder who himself became an outspoken activist for the one-state solution, considered that “the image and reputation of the association as a professional, scholarly, and not an advocacy, organization are compromised,” and pledged to petition the board at the annual meeting to “reconsider” its relationship to the journal. Other contributors to *Word Crimes* like Professor Miriam Elman of Syracuse University considered the harsh reaction of her peers as a “smear campaign” and academic “bullying,” and warned that cutting ties between the journal and the AIS was tantamount to “academic thuggery” to stifle other scholars’ academic freedom. Mostly, those on the sidelines viewed the controversy as just another tempest in a teapot of the long history of the AIS.⁹³ Yet, the fallout from this event can still be felt several years later.

The fault-lines about what could and could not be said in Israel Studies – and in this case, the more prominent role of donors within this debate – split into an open chasm with another major scandal in 2022 when Seattle Jewish philanthropist Becky Benaroya withdrew her \$5 million of funding to the University of Washington (UW) for the chair in Israel Studies. According to reports, she was incensed to learn that the Benaroya Chair post-holder, Professor Liora Halperin, had signed a 2021 petition associating Israel with settler-colonialism, Jewish supremacy, ethnonationalist segregation, discrimination and state violence, and seemingly advocated for a one-state solution. Halperin had also expressed an open desire to re-orient the program

in her name toward Israel/Palestine Studies and had titled some of her courses to reflect this new appellation.⁹⁴ (Halperin is also now on the advisory board of a new academic journal called the Palestine-Israel Review.⁹⁵) “I felt like it needed to be said...I decided I couldn’t be silent,” Halperin stressed in an interview to the progressive Jewish periodical *Jewish Currents*, “I didn’t express the political views the donors wanted and then a bunch of money went away.”⁹⁶ Halperin herself admitted that she considered the funding an ironclad permanent endowment, yet subsequent meetings between Benaroya, Halperin, other professors, university administrators, and the outside Zionist advocacy group *StandWithUs*⁹⁷ culminated in the donor and Israel Studies program parting ways.⁹⁸ Those who recall Halperin’s appointment at the time considered the process rushed⁹⁹ but confirmed that the candidate must have been aware of certain ideological or political red lines related to the donor’s gift and had presumably accepted them in taking up the offer. As a representative of a community advisory board wrote about the process, “(the position) was advocated for and funded with the intention of offering a safe and open space for intellectual curiosity about Israel that would strengthen, not undermine, its very existence.”¹⁰⁰ Subsequent to the revocation of Benaroya’s contribution to UW, Halperin was hailed as a martyr for academic freedom¹⁰¹ and was supported by official letters from the Association for Jewish Studies, the Middle East Studies Association, and the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors. Ultimately, Israel Studies funding was restored by other university monies and Halperin herself was promoted to associate professor in the aftermath of the public scandal.

Yet the events at UW did not remain on campus, reaching deeply into the larger field of Israel Studies. Some journalists pointed to the role of the AJS, ALEP, and the Israel Institute¹⁰³ as obstructing academic freedom in Israel Studies as a precedent to the U.W predicament. Left-wing supporters of Halperin also felt emboldened to air long-held private grievances about the sorry state of Israel Studies. Gershon Shafir, building on his critique of *Word Crimes* denounced donor interference across Israel Studies as a whole, complaining that “donors think of buying an academic like you buy a used car: someone who will do your bidding and basically protect Israel from any criticism.” The anti-Zionist scholar Tamir Sorek claimed that Halperin’s situation was far from unique (citing his own saga in hiring at the University of Florida and his subsequent move to Penn

State University¹⁰⁴) as “donors have been able to influence faculty selection... [with the result] that most of the positions in Israel Studies established over the past decade do not take a very critical stance.” The Leftist British-Israel Israel Studies chair Yair Wallach at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, took the opposite tack, suggesting “a significant number of people with Israel Studies positions are not doing Israel advocacy – what they do actually upsets people who want them to do advocacy.” Ultimately, even Mitchell Bard himself acknowledged that “unless universities don’t want the money, I’m not sure how you get around the fact that donors have expectations.”¹⁰⁵ Clearly, the issue brought old tensions between scholarship and advocacy in Israel Studies to the surface.

Subsequently, the UW scandal has split the Association for Israel Studies and Association for Jewish Studies apart – Halperin, notwithstanding, has suggested that AJS reconsider the inclusion of the Israel Studies Division – while galvanizing other self-consciously identifying professors of Jewish and Israel Studies to circulate further public statements. In August 2023, a group calling themselves “Academics4Peace” published a petition called “The Elephant in the Room,” which charged Israel with apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and Jewish supremacy.¹⁰⁶ This declaration was followed by further letters about the October 7 attacks (October 2023), an entreaty for a ceasefire in Gaza (December 2023), and a call to end U.S. arms sales to Israel (under the title “Genocide is Plausible,” March 2024).¹⁰⁷ Most recently, some members of the group have railed against “Israeli McCarthyism.”¹⁰⁸

Halperin herself along with many signatories of these petitions who are formal members of the AIS were notably absent from the 2024 annual conference in Prague, and some speculate that the organization may formally split into two factions.

As the free speech debates rage on campuses since 10/7, it is unclear how the Israel Studies community can heal its own internal rifts for the future.

5. Pedagogical Challenges of Israel Studies

The epistemological problems outlined here are not only scholarly dilemmas for research and professional norms but have proved challenging for the development of a pedagogy of Israel Studies that satisfies an activist classroom.

As Amelia Rosenberg Weinreb adduced in her work “Teaching Israel Studies,” the advent of Israel Studies outpaced any model for teaching and learning.¹⁰⁹ In her assessment, students of Israel Studies (often from heritage or faith backgrounds with ties to the region) would not accept the traditional “sage on the stage” model and demanded a more student-oriented, participation-directed classroom that is very different from most American university teaching.¹¹⁰ (For example, the demand for student participation in an Israel Studies course is very different from Calculus 101 or even English Literature 101 where students are more accustomed to frontal-instruction.) This “interactive” approach is bound to “insert risk” into the classroom, with the burden falling mainly on the instructor, who must be able to moderate lively and even tendentious class discussions, emotional outbursts, and intrusive behaviors that can easily characterize the Israel Studies classroom.¹¹¹ Professors and students also confront third rails of campus politics in Israel Studies courses, including those that go far beyond the geographical boundaries of the Middle East to confront profound societal questions about nationalism, ideology, religion, and politics, as well as contemporary trends toward narrative, positionality, and cancel culture.¹¹² This highly polemical material can prove explosive without a pedagogical strategy to manage conflicting opinions, challenge entrenched viewpoints, and confront deeply held anxieties.

As discussed, Jewish and other Ethnic Studies has often gone to two extremes to confront these pedagogical challenges – on the one hand, the rigidity of a pure academic perspective or on the other, the explicit introduction of politics and activism into the classroom. To avoid tensions and even “manage optics” Israel Studies professors have also adopted the “teach everything except the Arab-Israeli conflict,” approach, teaching so-called “soft” issues of Israeli society that highlight multiculturalism, or focusing on “fun” courses like foodways and film.¹¹³ Yet in a climate where even civility as an academic and social principle is under assault as a tool of “normalization” it has become almost impossible to avoid conflict in the Israel Studies classroom. In many cases, professors have become habituated to common classroom “scenarios that lead to rage and outrage, walking on eggshells and self-censorship, and defensiveness and insecurity in the classroom,”¹¹⁴ and must develop tools on the spot, including staging a curriculum, constructively guiding discussion, and diffusing emotional drama during class time. (As discussed later, this is broadly

connected to a larger campus crisis in constructive dialogue but has become a dominant feature of the Israel Studies classroom.)

Students themselves also face their own challenges in enrolling in Israel Studies courses. Some shy away from the participatory model or are deterred by classroom drama. Increasingly, it is becoming difficult to induce students to enroll in these courses, given the (perceived and real) high political and social costs in the campus environment of putting a class with “Zionism” or “Israel” on one’s academic transcript or C.V., or to social relations in the dorm or cafeteria. In light of today’s atmosphere, higher enrollments might also lead to students “hijacking” the classroom as an extension of encampment activities rather than as a space for critical analysis.

While in an ideal classroom, Israel Studies can be a rare example of tolerance on the university campus,¹¹⁵ Weinreb is candid about the severe difficulties of teaching Israel Studies, warning that many professors (often in temporary positions and lacking sufficient institutional support) who face difficult classrooms and the potential for professional scandal on a daily basis, suffer intense burnout and may ultimately decide to leave the academy altogether. Last but not least, while the “intersectional classroom” had already injected significant challenges into teaching and learning about Israel prior to October 7,¹¹⁶ the eruption of university campuses since the Hamas-Israel war has fundamentally compromised the possibility for a healthy exchange of ideas both within and beyond the Israel Studies classroom.

The failure of Israel Studies as an academic and pedagogical project is the result of both internal and external factors that sowed the seeds of its untenability in the university environment over the course of decades. Not all of these problems are the “fault” of Israel Studies as a discipline however (as described above), many grew up alongside the field and acted to constrain its approach and impact. A few important developments are enumerated here:

1. Ethnic Studies and Israel Studies: A Collision in the Making

As discussed earlier, Jewish Studies embraced the model of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* as it professionalized, which was an explicit statement about the “scientific” character of its discipline without regard to the interests of identity or ideology. This trend also affected the development of its sister-field Israel Studies, which suffered from extreme anxieties about its perception as “hasbara (public messaging) studies.” These choices put them on a collision course with other fields of Ethnic Studies.

Interestingly, the first Ethnic Studies program arose in 1968 after sit-ins at Brandeis University (originally founded as a Jewish institution) for Black Studies¹¹⁷ which soon expanded to other ethnicities (Latin/x Studies, Asian Studies, Native American Studies etc.) and often overlapped with existing Area Studies and Religious Studies programs including Middle East and Islamic Studies. The mission of these programs (and later, departments, centers, and other administrative units) was to institutionalize identity formation and to acquaint students with the languages, cultures, and narratives of their people. The orientation was explicitly activist, emerging directly from the civil rights struggle in the United States and Third World alliances abroad.

While many of these programs began with modest goals to teach an obscure dialect, to study wisdom literature and folklore, and to restore lost voices to the canon, as Ethnic Studies became more entrenched in university culture, it became increasingly oriented toward redressing the destruction of native/local civilizations and cultures by white (colonial) elites. Due to the histories of the groups they represent, Ethnic Studies and associated disciplines espoused discourses of post-colonialism, state violence, settler colonialism, and genocide, particularly inspired by the theoretical work of those like Edward Said, Frantz

Fanon, and Michel Foucault, as both explanatory and empowerment tools. This worldview also embraced ideas of intersectionality – where class, race, gender, and other categories coincide in lived experiences of bigotry and oppression. These theories have more recently overlapped with new fields of “Whiteness Studies” and “Critical Race Theory” that seek to understand legal and social constructions of race. The rigidity of the academic binaries of “non-white and white,” have been further essentialized to signify “victims and victimizers,” and “oppressed and oppressor,” and ultimately, “good and evil.” Ethnic Studies, therefore, was not only a passive exercise for the sake of knowledge, but an active intervention to allow its disciples to dismantle prevailing power structures.

For many scholars, the Israel-Palestine conflict represented a paradigmatic case of power relations and racial oppression (even national elimination) and became an important symbol of the mission of Ethnic Studies. Yet, the singular narrative of Palestinians as the only legitimate indigenous population “between the river and the sea” and one that was subjected to relentless state violence, ethnic cleansing, and genocide by the State of Israel provided an un-nuanced narrative. It marked Zionism only as a “white” settler colonial movement, which uncritically equates Ashkenazi lineage with “whiteness” and is absent any discussion of aspirations of Jewish self-determination, safe refuge, or national liberation by early Ashkenazi Zionist leaders or their experience of oppression and antisemitism in Europe. It is also an ahistorical presentation of the ethnic and racial makeup of contemporary Israel, that elides Israel’s demography today as a “majority-minority” society and the experience of antisemitic prejudice in the Arab world that expelled its Jewish populations in 1948 and after. This framing also fundamentally fails to acknowledge a constant state of war between Israelis, Palestinians, and Arabs since 1948. Palestinian society is tokenized and flattened as the epitome of oppression and victimhood, where historical agency is largely absent, stark political, geographic, religious, and demographic differences within Palestinian communities are largely ignored, and resistance (i.e., terrorism) is coded as “freedom fighting” or “resistance” against the power structure.

Ethnic Studies has not restricted its gaze merely to the Middle East however; it has created a whole construct of Jewish history and politics as part of its goal to

dismantle existing systems of oppression. (Ashkenazi) Jews have been coded as “white-passing,” accused of being beneficiaries of “white privilege,” and even charged with maintaining the power structure of white supremacy in the United States. These binaries leave no space to consider that Jews – and Israelis – could have any liminality, geographical and historical contingency, or indeed, could fall on the “wrong side” of the color line and be oppressed themselves. Its rigid understandings of racial hierarchies and power relations often ignore the persistence of violent antisemitism and much of the lived experience of Jews in both Europe and the United States. It also conveniently ignores anti-Jewish racism and oppression on the part of Black and Brown peoples. It is rather curious as to why the status of Jews and Israel has become an *idee fixe* of the field – which suggests a longstanding trope of anti-Judaism, where Jews become the focus of the deviant or alien to accepted trends or discourses.¹¹⁸

Although Ethnic Studies and its associated discourses have made important scholarly interventions and can be viewed as a positive development for some identity politics groups in the United States (and beyond) that have faced a long history of discrimination in the academy,

it has come under attack in recent years for an anti-American bias and for fomenting identity-politics warfare. Certainly, anti-imperial transnational solidarities with perceived oppressed minorities have long been a cornerstone of its agenda and resistance against the power structure (even “by any means necessary”) a part of its ideological orientation. Most importantly, Ethnic Studies continues to take explicit and aggressive activist political positions as part of its academic mission.

Now, over 50 years into its scholarly intervention, Ethnic Studies has become a fixture of the humanities and social sciences. Its tenets have been fully incorporated into the publishing, professionalization, and pedagogy of the field and it projects an ambitious agenda in committing itself to activism in domestic and foreign policy within and beyond the Ivory Tower. Professors and programs have embraced political statements, taken solidarity missions, and have avidly adopted the academic boycott of Israel and the BDS movement as part of their professional organizations, administrative units, and individual commitments. Further, professional organizations, search committees, editorial boards, and other administrative units act as gatekeepers, perpetuating these frameworks

(and often only these frameworks) within the academy. Many U.S. universities have normalized this unitary frame of power relations to such a degree that it poses severe academic and professional consequences to deviate from this accepted discourse. It has limited the appointment of professors to only those willing to subscribe to this scholarly narrative – especially as the job-market is extremely competitive with fewer and fewer positions so candidates feel pressure to conform to stated and unstated criteria as much as possible – as well as the prominence of BDS in the humanities and social sciences that serve as gatekeepers to block academic appointments by those who are deemed a “poor fit” with the prevailing dogma. This winnowing of the professorial worldview affects not only academic scholarship and publishing (increasingly policed by editors to ensure that only acceptable frameworks are put forward) but pedagogy, as students are increasingly exposed to only one narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These ways of thinking and acting now dominate most departments and have spilled over more largely into the campus environment, as reflected in much of the activities since October 7, 2023.

2. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) – For Everyone Except Jews and Israelis?

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks can be understood as the administrative vernacular of the goals of Ethnic Studies – the practical institutionalization of programs to offer support for ethnic, race, class, gender, religious, ethnic, age, ability, and other categories that have often experienced discrimination or exclusion from university spaces. Put otherwise, it can be interpreted as the manifestation of the activist agenda of academia as a management tool and workforce policy in the American university (which today is largely a corporate entity especially at elite private institutions).

While forerunners of today’s DEI policies were first put in place by executive order for government employees by the early 1960s, largely derivative of major milestones of the civil rights movement, DEI frameworks on university campuses arose mainly after the 1978 U.S. Supreme Court decision on affirmative action (*Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*), which allowed race to be considered as a preferential category in college admissions. Apart from its use as a selection criterion among students, faculty, and staff in both transparent and opaque ways,¹¹⁹ DEI programs have taken their mission further by creating

training sessions and meetings, hiring specialized staff to support diversity imperatives, codifying statements and bylaws, and coordinating new programs and policies. Although these were initially voluntary initiatives, they have now been mandated upon workplaces, with severe consequences and even dismissal for not adhering to these interventions. However, under scrutiny during the first and second Trump administrations, some public institutions like the University of Florida and the University of Michigan have radically reformed or done away with their DEI programs and other colleges are cutting budgets, rebranding, and restructuring these offices to soften concerns. Should Title VI suits against universities proceed, more dramatic steps may be taken in the near future on certain campuses that may shutter these services. Last but not least, larger political and cultural shifts will continue to affect universities – although this may actually strengthen DEI on campus, seen as the last bastion of anti-Trump holdouts and promote further radicalization of these programs.

The significant budgetary increases and hiring boom for DEI on campus has been notable, especially in comparison to significant contractures in the humanities and social sciences during the same period; according to one study of 85 campuses, DEI spending has increased by 27% in the past five years.¹²⁰ At some public universities, this has entailed allocating upwards of 8.5% of the annual operating budget – the leading spender, the University of Michigan, is reported to have established over 500 university positions related to DEI at a cost of over \$30 million annually to the state system.¹²¹ While private institutions are not required by law to release DEI data, Harvard University, the locus of the original campus firestorm over Israel, is estimated to have 98 positions across the various schools and faculties, to the tune of approximately \$15 million a year.¹²² Admirably, some DEI initiatives do seem to produce results: a substantial increase in the enrollment of minorities and more supportive environments for those in protected categories under its purview.

However, DEI has come under attack in recent years from Republican politicians and conservative figures who have railed against it for enshrining admissions policies that have systematically reduced the number of white (and “white passing” or high-achieving minorities, like Jews and Asians) students on elite university campuses. This polemic is backed up by real evidence: enrollment at selective universities with traditionally large Jewish student populations has

often been cut in half¹²³ – note the precipitous decline from 40% in 1967 to 33% in the early 2000s to 16% at the University of Pennsylvania today; most other Ivy League schools hover around 10%, having fallen from 20-25% decades ago. They also charge that DEI promotes divisiveness and preferential hierarchies between groups by pitting white and high-achieving minorities against other ethnic groups, introduces racial and other criteria into research and teaching that should be guided by the neutral scientific method, prioritizes diversity over other objective qualifications, and generally empowers activist and political agendas such as “critical race theory” to dismantle the existing system.

On its face, one might think that DEI would be beneficial for Jews as a small religious and ethnic minority in the United States, but in practice it has excluded their concerns from its remit and has even been rebuked for both ignoring and fomenting antisemitism on university campuses. Like Ethnic Studies, DEI has coded (Ashkenazi) Jews in the United States in recent generations as an exclusively white and privileged group and completely ignores Jews of color entirely. For example, as revealed at Stanford University (through a lawsuit brought against it by the Brandeis Center), despite the fact that Jews are only 2.4% of the population of the United States, administrators’ understanding of power relations dictated that “Jews, unlike other minority group(s), possess privilege and power, Jews and victims of Jew-hatred do not merit or necessitate the attention of the DEI committee.”¹²⁴ Further, Jews were routinely excluded from the traditional purview of DEI bias claims and were not even considered a category entitled to federal Title VI anti-discrimination protections until 2004.¹²⁵ Antisemitism was also not considered a DEI priority – Harvard University admitted in the wake of recent scandals that it wasn’t even part of their campus DEI programming until November 2023¹²⁶ and another report by the activist organization “Stop Antisemitism” found only 2 of 24 programs it surveyed in 2022 included antisemitism trainings or programs as part of the broader mission of promoting minority support.¹²⁷ While DEI had begun to identify traditional right-wing antisemitism as a threat to Jewish communities (if only, however, as part of a larger concern about white nationalism) in the wake of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting in 2018, it has proved incapable, both before and after 7 October, of being able to distinguish and deter antisemitic anti-Zionism on the Left.¹²⁸ DEI frameworks simply could not conceive of Israelis – or Diaspora Jews – impacted by 10/7 at American universities as true victims of both

macro- and micro-aggressions, even when verbal and physical violence was documented toward them on campus. (When acknowledged, often only under duress, administrations have also rarely enforced any consequences against assailants.) The pro-Palestinian agenda was implicitly adopted as a correct manifestation of DEI priorities, which extended support to tent encampments and other student protests. In some cases, DEI administrators themselves were revealed to have engaged in anti-Zionist and antisemitic activity on social media (see for example, the leaked conversations of Columbia University administrators during a Congressional Hearing on campus antisemitism¹²⁹) and in training materials.¹³⁰

While there is some evidence of a backlash against DEI programs at public universities (including at the University of Michigan) and it has been banned entirely in the state of Florida, as DEI administrators likely gain larger budgets and unchecked powers, these concerns will only become more entrenched.

3. Despotism Dough: With Big Money Comes Big Impact

Although Israel Studies was considered to be a well-funded small field relative to other one-country studies, this private support was immediately dwarfed by government-sponsored philanthropy by despotic regimes like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and other Middle Eastern countries known as human rights violating nations that are hostile to Israel, support its destruction, and act as state-sponsors of terrorist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah.¹³¹ These countries were willing to invest heavily in university campuses to rehabilitate their international image and influence the pipeline of discourse from academia into the larger American scene. The surge of anti-Zionist antisemitism at many institutions since 10/7 triggered congressional and media investigation that has recently revealed often hidden and astonishing financial contributions to both private and public universities in the U.S. over the past several decades.¹³²

While new scrutiny has brought these sources of university funding into the spotlight, sponsorship of Arab and Arab-American student groups on campuses began in the 1970s by shadowy Arab government organizations with ties to terror groups like the PLO and PFLP.¹³³ Their relatively small-scale efforts helped build new alliances with Ethnic Studies and DEI communities. However, in a major development in 1995, the Emirate of Qatar founded a non-profit called

The Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development, which has subsequently been used as private foundation to funnel regime funding to universities in the U.S. and across the West. The regime became the primary donor to Middle Eastern Studies programs across the United States and also established U.S. satellite campuses in Qatar of elite institutions like Northwestern University, Georgetown University, Weill-Cornell Medical School, and Carnegie Mellon University; Texas A&M halted its billion-dollar agreement in February 2024. Conservative estimates suggest that in the two decades since 9/11, over \$4.7 billion has been contributed, including through opaque vehicles disguising Qatari state involvement, although a true amount is impossible to calculate as universities have exploited legal loopholes and failed to comply with the reporting requirements of the 1967 Higher Education Act.¹³⁴ (The lengths universities have gone to conceal these donations became evident when the presidents of Harvard, MIT, and the University of Pennsylvania all dodged questions in sworn testimony before Congress in Winter 2024.¹³⁵) A 2023 report also examined the funding of other powerful Arab states including Saudi Arabia (which has a large population of foreign students in the U.S. studying as well) to the tune of \$2.9 billion, the UAE (\$1.3 billion), Kuwait (\$858 million), and other regional powers, which taken together with Qatar, amount to 23% of all university donations per annum.¹³⁶

Not only the creation and continued support of the field of Middle Eastern Studies, but its deeply entrenched anti-Israel and often anti-American views¹³⁷ can be traced to the ideological and monetary support of its funders. (While it is difficult to directly connect the dots, there is more investigation underway since October 7 to conclusively illustrate this influence beyond reasonable conjecture.) Yet, these nations have taken pains to conceal broader intellectual and social agendas on university campuses.¹³⁸ Middle Eastern dictatorships have positioned themselves as benevolent, even enlightened, patrons of the arts and sciences at American universities, which acts as a pipeline to major centers of power and influence in the United States. Further, by dint of their affiliations, these campuses are often silent partners to rampant human rights abuses and illiberal agendas – including on satellite campuses abroad.¹³⁹ These relationships also ignore Qatar and other Middle East nations' role as state-sponsors of terrorism which has profound implications for university campuses post-10/7. These arrangements may even constitute a national security threat

to the United States.¹⁴⁰ (There are also allegations that Iran has been helping fund the student encampment movement.¹⁴¹) It is also not known how much foreign funding might be diverted to other university units, including DEI programs.

4. Cancel Culture and the American Campus Scene: Israel/Palestine as Canary in the Coalmine?

The question of Israel/Palestine is often not only a substantive debate among faculty, students, and administrators but functions largely as a proverbial canary in the coalmine of campus culture in recent years.

The dysfunctional discourse around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is merely one exemplar of a crisis of conversation in the university climate. The dogmas of Ethnic Studies and DEI reinforced by lavish Middle East funding have determined the kind of speech (and speech-acts) that are platformed on campus. Today, this allows only “preferential speech” that expresses a strict set of ideas and “cancels” with public shame or silence both words and deeds that challenge these norms. Long before 10/7, Zionist speech or assertions of Jewish victimhood (including antisemitism) tested the boundaries of “woke” acceptability.¹⁴² Publications,¹⁴³ courses,¹⁴⁴ and events¹⁴⁵ were shut down by social media campaigns, online petitions, and networks of gatekeeping. There were also “cancellations” in real-time with shouting, walkouts, and even open violent confrontation. Indeed, these “cancelling” tools provided a template for action when other heterodox, conservative, or “unwoke” viewpoints were expressed on campus.

Further, the Israeli-Palestine issue has literally mapped the contours of the free speech debates on the quadrangle: critics who charge that antisemitism is being “weaponized” to curtail Palestinian free speech have shaped a larger movement that claims any speech that does not seek to dismantle the power structure must not be platformed and is itself a form of violence.¹⁴⁶ (Most campuses refuse to accept the IHRA working definition of antisemitism, a framework adopted by hundreds of governments, NGOs, and other organizations, on the grounds that it characterizes some anti-Zionist speech and acts as antisemitic.¹⁴⁷) The events of 10/7 have also raised the stakes on whether universities can and should take official positions on global affairs, whether the classroom is an activist space,

and how open to a range of ideas the university campus should be in the future. New proposals for campus free speech guidelines including the University of Chicago doctrine¹⁴⁸ and the so-called (Harvard Professor Steven) Pinsker proposal¹⁴⁹ reflect the deep impact of 10/7 and its aftermath on the university discourse. Today, the activist-oriented campus is the current trend and free speech around Israel-Palestine does not remain “free.” It is unclear when this might change – some look to the pendulum-swing after 1960s radicalism on campus as a predictor – but until this happens, Israel Studies has no future when much of its content has been “cancelled” until further notice.

Part III: Recommendations – Can Israel Studies Be Saved?

As the previous section of this report laid out, an analysis of the trends and challenges facing the field provides a pessimistic view of the viability of Israel Studies in the current campus climate. To be sure, it is already nearly impossible for Israel Studies to sustain itself against the onslaught of external pressures that are both deeply entrenched and disproportionately funded, especially in the absence of any administrative intent to promote change in the academy. Unless significant “top-down” reforms are enacted to challenge unitary discourses about Israel/Palestine, reform campus bureaucratic programs, and challenge the political and social culture to allow for a healthier climate for the exchange of ideas, Israel Studies cannot survive or thrive in academia any longer.

As the recent disruption of a Modern Israel class at Columbia University has demonstrated, the demise of Israel Studies may come before the end of the semester (!) if courses are interrupted by protestors on a regular basis and must now be taught with a guard posted outside the classroom door – it puts the very safety of professors and students at risk.¹⁵⁰ Thus far, this has been an isolated incident, but the hostile campus climate intimidates both teachers and pupils from engaging in a research or classroom setting. Any association with Israel Studies now carries both professional and personal consequences within a campus community. Students will not willingly seek to enroll in these classes and may be penalized for it by other professors, by their peers, and even by some employers in future careers. (According to an Autumn Semester 2024 ADL and Hillel International survey, 83% of Jewish students report having been the target of or witnessing antisemitism since 10/7 and it is unlikely they will want to put themselves in situations where their affiliation with Israel, even as a topic of study, will provide additional exposure.¹⁵¹) Certainly, the professoriate will seek to isolate existing professors and block hiring of new staff that will want to identify with Israel Studies. Given that Israel Studies is increasingly becoming a pariah field, it is difficult to understand how it can chart a path forward.

Yet, Israel Studies as a discipline also bears responsibility for its failure to introduce reforms, outlined below, that might have at least allowed it to achieve more internal coherence and activate possible interventions in the face of these factors beyond its control. While it may be said that Israel Studies needs to hold itself to a higher standard and enforce some kind of field-wide discipline in a way that is greater than other university departments and programs, the reality is that it may be the only way for Israel Studies to exert some internal cohesion and control over its fate.

1. Israel Studies: Time to Find Yourself!

As discussed, Israel Studies is in the midst of a profound identity crisis, unable to answer simple questions about the field's purview, prerogatives, and political orientation. Israel Studies has privileged inclusivity over identity, which has grown its affiliate base, but has failed to provide for a firm understanding of itself or its metrics for success. This has left Israel Studies profoundly unequipped to face both donors and detractors. Often Israel Studies seems to try harder to anxiously please its critics while alienating its supporters. In a larger academic environment where the prevailing dogmas have framed Zionism and the State of Israel as manifestations of settler-colonialism, apartheid, and genocide, Israel Studies simply has no well-defined or unified intellectual framing to offer. It also seems to have no clear understanding of its relationship, or lack thereof, to the field of Palestine Studies, and little in the way of pragmatic strategies to facilitate collaboration with other departments or disciplines across the university (other than on a local, ad-hoc basis), especially in light of the academic boycott. Last but not least, Israel Studies is the subject of public scrutiny yet has an ambivalent attitude toward the lay public. At best, Israel Studies currently operates in a highly decentralized fashion and is lacking in object criterion and standards, at worst it is deliberately opaque, politicized, and even capricious.

Therefore:

- The Association for Israel Studies, the European Association for Israel Studies, and the Israel Institute should be unified as a single academic body with a funding arm that can collectively formulate and finance the future of Israel Studies. While this cannot replace local decision making,

this new body can and should use its authority over its membership and grant-recipients to impose some coherence across many campuses. (This can be achieved in a more democratic fashion through working groups and referendums, although the organization should adhere to strict deadlines (1 year) to complete this process.).

- This new organization (which we'll call for convention, the AIS-II) and other Israel Studies leadership needs to assert stronger leadership and publicize, in writing, a definition of the field of Israel Studies and a blueprint for a generational agenda that will outline lacunae in the scholarship and set priorities for research and publication.
- Israel Studies must clearly articulate and disclose criteria for qualifications of affiliated scholars, including expectations for doctoral curriculum, methodological approaches, in-country experience, cultural training, and language requirements. Particularly for PhD students, it is imperative to define what is considered "an original contribution to the field," in Israel Studies, in reference to a new generational research agenda. It should also develop suggested guidelines for hiring practices, tenure, and promotion for dissemination at the local university level. Publication requirements should be clarified in consultation associated journals and academic presses and be available to applicants. Metrics for innovation and excellence for prizes, grants, leadership positions, and other awards in the field should also be made transparent.
- Israel Studies must attempt to create a more integrated methodological and technical vocabulary (or at least to clarify which disciplines and conceptualizations have standing) for scholarship in the field and to promote a more rigorous understanding of what interdisciplinary studies means in the context of the field.
- Using its new definition demarcating the boundaries of Israel Studies, the field must consider and circulate a vision of the relationship between Israel Studies and Palestine Studies and any plans for collaboration in the future. With a stronger self-understanding, it can also liaise more purposefully with other one-country and smaller fields on an administrative level.
- Israel Studies needs to completely overhaul the teaching of the field on

university campuses. First and foremost, it must define and implement a more centralized curriculum in Israel Studies, criterion for what constitutes “academic rigor,” and coherent metrics of learning success for implementation on the local university level. It must also develop and train scholars in pedagogical strategies for the teaching of Israel Studies in the current classroom and university environment. It should provide a network of support for both students and instructors and “crisis intervention” for campuses undergoing particular upheaval.

- The AIS-II and other Israel Studies leadership must articulate some basic understanding of the political and ideological orientations of Israel Studies. While due to academic freedom, it cannot mandate any viewpoint upon scholars themselves, it can minimally express the shared values of the organization regarding essential questions like “the right of the State of Israel to exist” and insist that those who want to join its organization or hold positions would be implicitly subscribing to this baseline criteria.
- * It should consider formulating guidance documents for the discussion of hot-button topics like “apartheid,” or “genocide,” based on the most cutting-edge and contextualized scholarship in the field.
- * Perhaps most controversially, Israel Studies needs to take a bolder stance on strict academic neutrality (if it wishes to continue to uphold the principle). It needs to evaluate whether the field as it currently stands is indeed truly agnostic to questions of peoplehood and politics – which is highly dubious given the trend toward self-excoriation (there was nothing “apolitical” about post-Zionism or anti-Zionist attitudes already) – and to undertake a meaningful exchange on whether Israel Studies can and should continue to be unconcerned and unresponsive to ideological challenges within and beyond the university. This does not mean adopting a unified position, rather an acknowledgement of whether complete detachment from contemporary questions is possible or desirable. Given that strict academic neutrality or self-criticism has not allayed suspicions that Israel Studies is merely “hasbara studies,” the field must also more strenuously face down its critics – making a vocal effort to underscore the hypocrisy and unlevel playing field between Israel, Middle East and Ethnic Studies, and to stress the value

it brings to the university, that goes beyond the subject matter itself, of participating in the larger project of upholding scholarly values against the rising tide of activism in the academy.

- * Israel Studies must also have a clear-eyed understanding of the opportunity cost it pays vis a vis all other forms of Ethnic Studies in failing to provide generations of students with a sense of national identity, ethnic pride, and activist tools to engage with the world. The AIS-II may want to consider more formal partnerships (or recommended alliances) with other organizations and institutions that could fill this void in the future.
- Based on all this new thinking, the AIS-II can publish guidance for universities in working with donors to create realistic expectations about the research priorities, pedagogical approaches, and ideological orientations of potential postholders that characterize the contemporary job marketplace. Universities and donors should also clarify mutual responsibilities and “return on investment,” put them in writing, and hold a postholder contractually responsible to these demands to ensure a relationship built on trust and shared tenets.
- * Israel Studies must also try harder to capitalize on the post-10/7 university crisis to cultivate more donor support. While even a massive influx of financial resources into Israel Studies cannot compete with the seemingly unlimited capital of regimes like Qatar and Saudi Arabia, it can make targeted interventions by supporting new research agendas, providing more pedagogical training and support networks, encouraging success metrics and data collection, and expanding hiring. Donors should focus not only on strengthening current programs but also helping Israel Studies expand to new campuses – especially those that might prove more hospitable. (These may include positions at historically Black and Latino universities, at Evangelical, Catholic, and Mormon institutions, and in the South and West of the United States, as well as expand overseas beyond existing positions in the UK, Europe, and Israel.) Philanthropists could also offer scholarships and subventions for students in Israel Studies to increase enrollments and generally incentivize engagement with other narratives on campus. Donors might

also want to integrate Israel Studies funding into larger campus-culture initiatives, that would be inclined toward more balanced narratives and healthier discourse. While “throwing money at the problem,” will not necessarily produce internal reforms nor can compete with Middle East funding, a strategic deployment of funds could offer greater buy-in both at the discursive and administrative level on a wider-variety of campuses that might give Israel Studies more room to maneuver.

- * Most importantly, the Israel Studies community must acknowledge that it does not – and will not – exist without donor support and it must both repair burnt bridges and provide assurances that fundings will be well-spent in the future.
- Similar to its new approach to donors, Israel Studies can and should liaise with the lay public about what its scholars can offer the community. The field cannot simply “hide under its desk” in this heady historical moment but must endeavor to bring rigorous and informed scholarly perspectives to the public square. Further, rather than adopting an attitude of diffidence, Israel Studies should acknowledge different approaches and even diverging opinions between academia and the lay public on major communal challenges like antisemitism, identity-formation, and the role of Zionism in American Jewish life (or even the relevance of scholarship to public concern) and open a dialogue on these issues. Ultimately Israel Studies must try to see itself as a bridge, not a moat, to broader communities beyond the Ivory Tower.

There is no doubt that these internal reforms may necessitate hard decisions about the priorities of current and future generations, the potential for collaboration, and even the capacity of the field to accommodate all scholars, but some kind of discipline on the future of Israel Studies must be imposed.

It is also not certain that all scholars would be willing to remain within the framework of Israel Studies under these new programs of action. (At the same time, there may be a new influx of scholars who can be integrated into this program of action!) With possible defections in mind, the Israel Studies community should consider new ways to grow – while also being realistic about funded positions and campus challenges that act as constraints.

The Role of Policy Institutes: Re-Orienting Israel Studies Beyond the University Campus

Unfortunately, the program of internal reform outlined above is aspirational – it is unclear that the AIS, the Israel Institute, or other leadership in the field is able or willing to assume this kind of authority or could successfully implement the series of reforms required to sustain Israel Studies in the long-term.

Further, even if Israel Studies makes every possible corrective, the exogenous trends are so overwhelming that the campus may soon be lost.

Israel Studies has a future – but it may not be in a conventional university setting or with the current constituencies of professors and students. The study and teaching of modern Israel is too important in this day and age to be discarded alongside the detritus of university encampments. The next generation must be offered a more sustainable model of Israel Studies for the future as a matter of policy for the Jewish people.

New initiatives and delivery channels that the “think tankerati” could uniquely facilitate could save the field of Israel Studies:

- Distinctive educational programs should be designed to directly address critical “buzzwords” (settler-colonialism, apartheid, genocide etc.) head-on – as a “team-taught” initiative. In cooperation with organizations like the Israel Institute, policy planners could also work to have these courses university-accredited or to recognize their training toward degree-requirements or preparation for the job market.
- * These learning opportunities could also be tailored toward different groups –first and foremost, to meet the challenge of students (perhaps with accreditation or other certificates) and Jewish/Zionist lay publics and educators that are not served well but other extant forms of Israel Education on campus (e.g. through Hillel International or Chabad, experiential education like Birthright Israel, activist organizations on campus, or even digital platforms) that lack the unbiased and scholarly content, critical learning skillsets, and trained staff to deliver even a simulacrum for what the best of Israel Studies can do. Policy planners should also seize the opportunity to expand into other marketplaces

that are currently unserved by any kind of formal curriculum in Israel Studies including DEI administrators, media professionals, activists, business/risk analysis, national security officials, and others who have the need for the kind of in-depth knowledge we can provide. This could engage audiences in the West and also worldwide. Training programs and seminars should also be designed for university administrators, DEI professionals, and other campus staff to provide robust training on Zionism, Israel, and antisemitism, perhaps in partnership with the ADL, AJC, and AEN that have already begun liaising with these roles for community-building purposes, but are not providing a robust framework to more deeply educate around the issues.

- Policy professionals should work directly with the Israeli government to enhance their efforts deploy more teaching and training on Zionism and Modern Israel, including for millennials and young people both before and after university, including through projects like Birthright-Israel, MASA, and other programs that could add a curriculum requirement.
- Interactions between Jewish-Americans and Israeli civil society that challenge prevailing dogmas should be facilitated.
- Data technology should be harnessed to create metrics for success in learning and donor return-on-investment in Israel Studies.

Conclusion

While many trends were evident prior to October 7, the challenges Israel Studies faces today – without exaggeration – may put the field at the brink of extinction.

Israel Studies finds itself extremely isolated in academia and may soon be administratively homeless. It has already been purged from its geographical position within Middle East Studies, does not share the values or orientation of other Ethnic Studies, and is likely to also be separated from Jewish Studies, so it is unclear how it can continue to engage in a university environment. Israel Studies programs themselves are currently under assault with demands for university divestment from Israel, widespread adoption by professional organizations and individual departments of the academic boycott of Israeli institutions where students study abroad and faculty have academic collaborations (one U.S. university has even ended its partnership with the University of Haifa¹⁵²), calls to close Israel Studies centers (most notably, at UCLA¹⁵³) and to disband partnerships with Jewish and Zionist philanthropies including the Israel Institute (at University of California Santa Barbara)¹⁵⁴ and the disruption of both scholarly and public events hosted by these programs. The intensification of the academic boycott of Israel will affect not only Israeli institutions and scholars but likely also those who profess any Zionist commitments, which will further marginalize scholars in the field. BDS will also exacerbate the selection bias solely toward non/anti-Zionist professors within Israel Studies and a culture of self-censorship of current faculty and students in order for the field to conform with broader campus culture. Israel Studies programs will be highly constrained in what they can publish and teach and the kind of public-facing events they might host. Should the campus situation deteriorate further, both faculty and students could find themselves threatened by verbal or physical violence or complete exclusion.

At the same time, Israel Studies continues to have an uneasy relationship with the lay public, does not see itself as bridge between academia and audiences beyond the Ivory Tower, and has even burnt bridges with donors over ideological issues. While even a massive influx of financial support into Israel Studies likely could not compete with the seemingly unlimited capital of regimes like Qatar or Saudi Arabi, relations between Israel Studies and its donors may have deteriorated to the point that even former supporters would now be unwilling to invest their resources in the field, or the academy altogether. (Indeed, many prominent donors have rescinded large contributions to universities over antisemitism allegations in the last several months.) Some in the Ivory Tower of Israel Studies have positioned themselves as so remote, or even in opposition to, lay publics and donors that they consider them simply irrelevant. Israel Studies and its supporters, therefore, are at an impasse.

It is also possible that if Israel Studies takes no concrete steps toward self-definition or embraces an opportunity to ring-fence its activities with the support of increased donor funding, it might simply be absorbed into the growing field of Palestine Studies or completely abolished by university administrators. From the perspective of campus corporate bureaucracy, Israel Studies may not meet any core curriculum requirements, is not likely to bring major revenue streams into the system (at least that benefit the university as a whole), cannot be integrated into the larger academic and campus culture, and generally can present political problems. Therefore, post-October 7, there may be little *raison de etre* to keep Israel Studies intact “as is” unless there are significant intellectual and financial imperatives that make it competitive with corporate agendas. Of course, if university administrations were willing to rigorously address the exogenous factors affecting both scholarly discourse and campus climate, Israel Studies (with some of its own efforts to reform) could rebound – but if trends from the past year continue, it can only be predicted that bureaucrats will continue to be passive and Israel Studies will likely be sacrificed to campus and corporate imperatives.

The unfortunate irony of the dismal situation of Israel Studies today is there is no doubt that there are constituencies – both within and outside the university – who urgently recognize the need for the knowledge and analytical tools the field has to offer. 10/7 brought the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into public view once again and it has now emerged as a central issue in national and local elections, corporate governance, the media, activism, and the public square. The market for students and scholarship, in a normal situation, should have grown exponentially, with universities racing to invest resources in these programs and with the concerted efforts of both campus and external partners to seize the moment. Unfortunately, because Israel Studies occupies such a difficult ideological space in the campus environment, these opportunities will likely be lost to the detriment both of academia and society.

It is our hope that this report may serve as a wake-up call to Israel Studies professionals about the precarious state of the field and its future.

Endnotes

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- 3 Judith R. Bashkin, "Jewish Studies in North American Colleges and Universities: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," *Shofar* 32:4 (2014): 9-26.
- 4 Ibid.
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- 6 Myron J. Aronoff, "Message from the President," *Newsletter of the Association for Israel Studies* 1:1 (Fall 1985), 1.
- 7 Miriam Shenkar, *The Politicization of Israel Studies* (Beersheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press), 2012, 11.
- 8 "News of the Association," Ibid.
- 9 Ian S. Lustick (ed.), *Books on Israel* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 1988.
- 10 Shenkar, 76.
- 11 Shenkar, 119.
- 12 S. Ilan Troen (ed), "Preface," *Israel Studies* 1:1 (Spring 1996).
- 13 Israeli historian Anita Shapira pointed to the removal of S. Yizhar's book *Hirbet Hizah* from the national list as an important turning-point in the erasure of the collective memory of the 1948 from the public consciousness by the Begin Administration and subsequent governments. See Anita Shapira, "Hirbet Hizah: Between Remembrance and Forgetting," *Jewish Social Studies* 7, No. 1 (Autumn 2000): 1-62.
- 14 For the most part, the New Historians eschewed oral history, a decision that came under intense scholarly scrutiny once the books were published.
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- 16 Simcha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (London: Croom-Helm, 1987). The book appeared shortly before Flapan's death that year, so he was not a voice in the New Historians debate beyond his written text.
- 17 Avi Shlaim, *Collusion Across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) and Ilan Pappé, *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1948-1951* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).
- 18 Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- 19 See for example, works like Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Tom Segev (trans. Haim Watzman), *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), Oren Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), and Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, *The Palestinians: The Making of a People* (New York: Free Press, 2003), all of which are now classics in the field.
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- 41 Mari Cohen, "The Fight for the Future of Israel Studies," *Jewish Currents*, Summer 2022
<https://jewishcurrents.org/the-fight-for-the-future-of-israel-studies>
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- 43 Janet Krasner Aronson, Annette Koren, and Leonard Saxe, "Teaching Israel at American Universities: Growth, Placement, and Future Prospects," *Israel Studies* 18:3 (Fall 2013), 158-178.
- 44 Koren and Einhorn, 1.
- 45 In one case, a professor is said to have quit mid-semester when students complained that her bent was excessively pro-Israel and that she used AIPAC's "Myths and Facts" advocacy booklet as a course text. Cohen, "The Fight for the Future of Israel Studies."
- 46 Fleisch, 16-17. Fleisch notes that the AJC was so insistent that the program be run in concert with academic principles that one donor apparently rescinded funding when told that Summer Institute was "not about Hasbara but about rather about engaging campuses academically." Ibid.
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- Histories of Israel-Palestine* (New York: The New Press, 2012), Paul Scham, Walid Salem, and Benjamin Pogrund, *Shared Histories: A Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 2016), Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). A book later published by a Brandeis University collaboration offered a tripartite narrative of Israelis, Palestinians, and Arab states, which has become a kind of standard-bearer in the field and widely adopted for course curricula, see Abdel Monem Said Aly, Shai Feldman, and Khalil Shikaki, *Arabs and Israelis: Conflict and Peacemaking in the Middle East* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).
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 - 59 See Reuven Hazan and Moshe Maor, *Parties, Elections, and Cleavages: Israel in Comparative and Theoretical Perspective* (London: Frank Cass), 2000 and Benyamin Neuberger, "Israel's Democracy and Comparative Politics," *Jewish Political Studies in the University* 1:3-4 (Fall 1989): 67-75.
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 - 61 See <https://www.societyforfrenchhistoricalstudies.net/history>
 - 62 Interview with Modern Greek Studies Association Executive Director Professor Vangelis Calotychos with the author, May 2024.
 - 63 Perhaps notably, the Armenian Studies program at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem has been one Casualty of such small-field budget cuts, see Arestakes Simavoryan and Vahram Hovyan, "Problems of the Centers for Armenian Studies and the Ways of their Solutions," *Globus Analytical Bulletin* 10 12 (2014). German Studies also reported to the author that several prominent positions in their field have closed recently at Pacific Lutheran University, William and Mary (one of the original colonial colleges), University of Southern California, and University of West Virginia – including because their programs are housed in language units that have been struck off university budgets entirely. Correspondence of Professor Margaret Menninger, German Studies Association, with the author, May 2024.

- 64 Correspondence with Professor Flora Ghazaryan, Executive Secretary of the Society for Armenian Studies with the author, April 2024.
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- 66 For an interesting comparative case from Armenian Studies, see Vartan Matiossian, "Armenian Studies in the US Under Renewed Assault: Can Calm Be Restored After the Storm?" *Journal of Armenian Studies* 18:2 (2009): 25-32.
- 67 Interview with Modern Greek Studies Association Executive Director Professor Vangelis Calotychos with the author, May 2024.
- 68 See <https://www.theasa.net/about/advocacy/resolutions-actions/resolutions/statement-puerto-rico>
- 69 For more information about Title VI National Resource Centers, see: <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/iegpsnrc/index.html>
- 70 A report by Professor Ian Lustick for internal circulation within the Association of Israel Studies in 2005 found that Said was the most represented author on syllabi of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the five previous years, appearing in 240 separate citations. See Shenkar, 239.
- 71 See Martin S. Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy), 2001.
- 72 Fleisch, 27.
- 73 Ali Banuazizi, former MESA President and Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies director at Boston College, as quoted in Liel Leibovitz, "Battle of the Chairs," *Moment Magazine*, February 2006.
- 74 See the full film here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLzfegav40U>
- 75 <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/-/-/palestine-israel/P125>
- 76 <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2023/11/21/campus-climate-resources>
- 77 Carsten Schapkow, "Introduction," in Carsten Schapkow and Klaus Hodl, *Jewish Studies and Israel Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Intersections and Prospects* (New York: Lexington Books), 2019, 1.
- 78 Andrew Koss, "Jewish Studies Against the Jews," *Mosaic Magazine*, 6 May 2024 and Natan Sharansky and Gil Troy, "The Un-Jews," *Tablet Magazine*, 16 June 2021.
- 79 See Yakov M. Rabkin and Yaacov Yadgar, "Israel Studies, the Jewish Challenge," in *Ibid.*
- 80 Yakov Rabkin, *Ibid.*
- 81 Johannes Becke, "Methodological Canaanism: The Case for a Rupture between Jewish Studies and Israel Studies," *Ibid.*
- 82 See Shenkar, 33 and 80. Indeed, bowing to these methodological considerations, the thrust of recent conferences and publications in Israel Studies have been in comparative history, sociology, literature, etc.
- 83 The author knows of several programs that are seeking to re-house Israel Studies outside of Jewish Studies.
- 84 Shenkar, 21.
- 85 Shenkar, 25. Shenkar uses the terminology of "top down" vs. "bottom up" funding. This, of course, is perhaps a peculiarity of the American system, as many European programs in Israel and Jewish Studies are sponsored directly by the State.
- 86 See for example, Joshua Chaffin, "Qatar's Ties to US Universities Scrutinized Amid Rise in Antisemitism," *Financial Times*, 17 March 2024 <https://www.ft.com/content/d0a16f75-8b05-4ff9-b5f1-d473d7f5a704>
- 87 Fleisch, 67.
- 88 Liebovitz, "Battle of the Chairs."

- 89 Fleisch, 75-78.
- 90 Donna Robinson Divine, "Introduction-Word Crimes: Reclaiming the Language of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict" *Israel Studies* 24:2 (Summer 2019): 1-16.
- 91 In full disclosure, the author herself criticized this at the time.
- 92 <https://medium.com/the-israel-studies-conversation/a-protest-letter-to-the-israel-studies-journal-33d760827feb>
- 93 Judy Maltz, "'Anti-BDS, pro-Israel Hasbara': Internal War Breaks Out in Israel Studies Field," *Haaretz*, 18 April 2019 <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/2019-04-18/ty-article/.premium/anti-bds-pro-israel-hasbara-internal-war-breaks-out-in-israel-studies-field/0000017f-ef17-d4cd-af7f-ef7f404a0000>
Shafir expanded on his views in *Fathom Journal*, see: <https://fathomjournal.org/the-word-crimes-controversy-2-gershon-shafir-responds-to-cary-nelson/>
- 94 See petition here: <https://israelpalestinejs.weebly.com/>
- 95 See https://www.psupress.org/journals/jnls_PIR.html
- 96 Cohen, "The Fight for the Future of Israel Studies."
- 97 The discussions were private, although some have suggested that Benaroya insisted that Halperin refrain from making further political statements and use "Israel" instead of "Israel/Palestine" in advertising course offerings. Halperin herself said that Benaroya "wanted (courses and public programs) about positive things that Israel was doing" and asked why the professor was putting "all this attention to political stuff." Ibid. According to reports, Benaroya has now donated the \$5million to the Zionist educational organization StandWithUs.
- 98 Andrew Lapin, "University of Washington Donor Pulls Funding for Israel Studies Program Over Professor's Criticism of Israel," *The Forward*, 25 April 2022
- 99 Ibid. In full disclosure, the author was invited to apply for this position and declined for both personal reasons as well as her perception that the competitive process was staged for a pre-selected candidate, although this is not a rare feature of academic job searches today.
- 100 Cohen, "The Fight for Israel Studies."
- 101 See Students United for Palestinian Equal Rights, "After UW Fails to Uphold Academic Freedom for Israel Studies Program, Palestinian Perspectives Must Be Included," *UW Daily*, 22 April 2022
- 102 Bard himself, interviewed about the UW chair, stated "it's kind of crapshoot for funders of Israel Studies, because there are so many Israel Studies professors out there who are hypercritical of Israel and in some cases, even anti-Israel." Cohen, "The Fight for Israel Studies."
- 103 Halperin herself was a recipient of funding from these organizations, the author was in a cohort of AICE graduate student fellows with Halperin.
- 104 See Cohen, "The Fight for Israel Studies."
- 105 Cohen, "The Fight for Israel Studies."
- 106 <https://sites.google.com/view/israel-elephant-in-the-room/petitions/aug-23-elephant-in-the-room?authuser=0>
- 107 All petitions can be found here: <https://www.academics4peace.org/home>
- 108 See <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2024-04-17/ty-article-opinion/.premium/students-are-at-the-forefrontof-israeli-mccarthyism/0000018e-e5fa-de97-a5bf-f5fad4e80000>
- 109 Amelia Rosenberg Weinreb, *Teaching Israel Studies: Global, Virtual, and Ethnographic Approaches to Active Learning* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022).
- 110 Ibid., 10-12.
- 111 Ibid., 27.
- 112 See also, Rachel S. Harris (editor), *Teaching the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019).
- 113 Weinreb, 114.
- 114 Ibid., 131.
- 115 henkar, 37.
- 116 See Aharon Klieman, "Israel Studies, Intersectionality, and the Changing American College Scene," in *Jewish and Israel Studies In the Twenty-First Century*, 133-156.

- 117 Later referred to as African-American Studies
- 118 ee David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014).
- 119 Over the past decade, professors applying for positions at many universities have been required to submit formal DEI statements as part of their application dossier which are considered alongside their scholarly merits (if the weighting is unclear or more recently has been made explicit that if the DEI statement is considered first and if it does not pass muster, the rest of the candidate portfolio will not be reviewed at all) and often must complete surveys (voluntary or otherwise) attesting to their racial, ethnic, religious, sexuality, disability, veteran status and other demographic data.
- 120 See “An Insight Investigation: Accounting for Just .5% of Higher Education’s Budgets, Even Minimal Diversity Funding Supports Their Bottom Line,” 16 October 2019
<https://www.insightintodiversity.com/an-insight-investigation-accounting-for-just-0-5-of-higher-educations-budgets-even-minimal-diversity-funding-supports-their-bottom-line/>
- 121 Jennifer Kabany, “UMICH Now Has More Than 500 Jobs Dedicated to DEI, Payroll Costs Exceed \$30 Million,” *The College Fix*, 9 January 2024
<https://www.thecollegefix.com/umich-now-has-more-than-500-jobs-dedicated-to-dei-payroll-costs-exceed-30-million/>
Upon the election of President Trump, likely fearing federal mandate, University of Michigan announced it would no longer require diversity statements in hiring and advancement, perhaps as a precursor to further DEI reforms:
<https://nypost.com/2024/12/07/us-news/university-of-michigan-to-dismantle-diversity-equity-inclusion-initiatives/>
- 122 Heather MacDonald, “Conservative Donors, Wake Up!” *City Journal*, Summer 2023
<https://www.city-journal.org/article/conservative-donors-wake-up>
- 123 Sara Weissman, “Jewish Enrollment is Down at Many Ivies,” *Inside Higher Ed*, 8 May 2023
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/admissions/2023/05/08/jewish-student-enrollment-down-many-ivies>
- 124 See the case here:
<https://brandeiscenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Stanford-Case-Materials-6-15-21.pdf>
- 125 See Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, “Why DEI Programs Can’t Address Campus Antisemitism,” *SAPIR Journal*, 7 August 2023
<https://sapirjournal.org/antisemitism/2023/08/why-dei-programs-cant-address-campus-antisemitism/>
- 126 See Janet Lorin, “Harvard to Add Antisemitism to DEI After Ackman Criticism,” *Bloomberg*, 9 November 2023
<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-11-09/harvard-to-add-antisemitism-to-dei-policy-afterackman-criticism>
- 127 See Report at <https://stopantisemitism.org/reports/>
- 128 See Armin Rosen, “The DEI Complex Will Never Protect Jews,” *Tablet Magazine*, 25 October 2023
<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/the-dei-complex-will-never-protect-jews>
- 129 See Sareen Habeshian, “3 Columbia Deans Who Engaged in Texts with ‘Antisemitic Tropes’ Resign, *Axios*, 8 August 2024 <https://www.axios.com/2024/08/08/columbia-deans-texts-antisemitism-resignation>
- 130 See also, James D. Paul and Jay P. Greene, “Our Research Shows Many DEI Staff Have a Blind Spot When It Comes to Jews,” *Forward*, 28 December 2021
<https://forward.com/opinion/480121/our-research-shows-many-dei-staffers-target-israel-ignore-antisemitism/>
- 131 See Charles Asher Small, “Follow the Money: Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood Funding of Higher Education in the United States,” *ISGAP Report* (Multiple Volumes in Series): <https://isgap.org/followthe-money/>
- 132 Given how unforthcoming many universities have been, Republican lawmakers advanced a new bill in January 2020 requiring colleges to disclose contracts with ‘foreign adversaries.’ See <https://www.dailysignal.com/2025/02/04/exclusive-congressman-introduces-bill-requiring-universities-disclose-contracts-foreign-adversaries/>

- 133 See Salim Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers: American, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East Relations in the 1970s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).
- 134 Sophie Shulman, "Tuition of Terror," *Ctech-Calcalist*, 30 October 2023 <https://www.calcalistech.com/ctechnews/article/jwhsqhrt>
- 135 Jeremy Bauer-Wolf, "Harvard, MIT, and Penn Presidents Land in Congressional Hot Seat Over Antisemitism," *Higher Ed. Dive*, 5 December 2023 <https://www.highereddiver.com/news/harvard-mit-and-penn-presidents-land-in-congressional-hot-seat-over-antise/701666/>
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- 144 See Ryan Quinn, "Middle East Conflict, in Chicago," *Inside Higher Ed*, 1 March 2023 <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/03/02/palestine-supporters-protest-ex%E2%80%9393israeli-generals-class-chicago>. There have been further campaigns targeting more professors at the University of Chicago and similar actions on other campuses as well.
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This was perhaps the most prominent, but only one of many, similar incidents over the past few years.
- 146 See for example, this conversation between Peter Beinart and Omer Bar-Tov: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xtP7CVSJGY>
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- 148 See text at: <https://freeexpression.uchicago.edu/history/>
- 149 See for example, <https://www.thefire.org/news/steven-pinker-why-free-speech-fundamental>
- 150 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/columbia-anti-israel-activists-start-semester-with-protest-class-disruption/>
- 151 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/survey-83-of-jewish-us-college-students-have-experienced-antisemitism-since-oct-7/> 152 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/us-college-shut-down-study-abroad-program-israel>
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